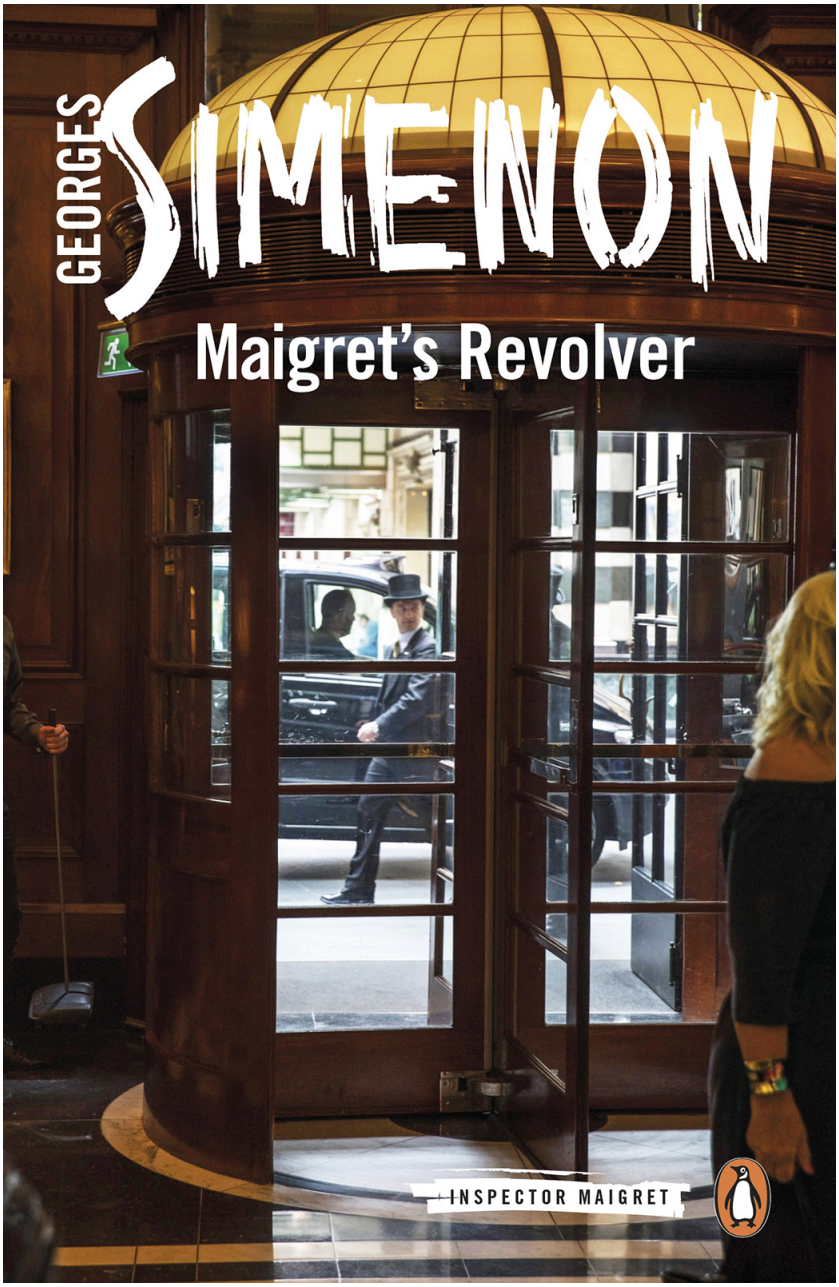
GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret's Revolver
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points . . . 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

Maigret's Revolver

Georges Simenon

Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS

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EXTRA: Chapter 1 from *Maigret and the Man on the Bench*

1.

In which Maigret arrives late for lunch and a guest fails to turn up for dinner

When, in later years, Maigret looked back on this particular investigation, it would always strike him as something a little out of the ordinary, associated in his mind with the kind of illness that does not declare itself clearly but begins with vague twinges, feelings of unease, symptoms too mild to take seriously.

The first sign had been neither a complaint to the Police Judiciaire, nor an emergency appeal for help or anonymous tip-off, but instead, to go back to the very beginning, an innocuous phone call from Madame Maigret.

The black marble clock on the office mantelpiece was showing twenty to twelve; he could clearly recall the angle of the hands on its face. The window was wide open, since it was a June day, and under the warm sunshine Paris was already smelling of summer.

'Is that you?'

His wife had of course recognized his voice. But she always asked if it was him on the other end, not out of distrust but because she had always been awkward on the phone. In Boulevard Richard-Lenoir too, the windows would be wide open, and by now Madame Maigret would have finished most of her household tasks. It was unusual for her to telephone.

'Yes, it's me.'

'I wanted to ask if you would be home for lunch.'

It was even more unusual for her to call with such a question. He frowned, not from irritation but in surprise.

'Why?'

'Oh, nothing. Or rather, there's someone here to see you.'

He could sense she was feeling embarrassed, almost at fault.

'Who?'

'Nobody you know. It's nothing. Just that if you won't be home for lunch, I'll tell him not to wait.'

'A man, then?'

'A young man.'

She had no doubt taken the visitor into the front room, which they hardly ever used. The telephone was in the dining room, where they usually sat and where they received guests they knew well. It was where Maigret kept his pipes and had his armchair, and Madame Maigret her sewing machine. From the awkward way she was talking, he understood that she had not dared close the door between the two rooms.

'Who is he?'

'I don't know!'

'What does he want?'

'I don't know that either. He says it's personal.'

He didn't attach much importance to the call. If he was asking questions, it was only because of his wife's hesitation, and also because it seemed to him that she had already taken the visitor under her wing.

'I should be leaving the office at about twelve,' he said in the end.

There was only one more person to see, a woman who had already come three or four times to complain about threatening letters from her neighbour. He pressed the buzzer for the office boy.

'Show her in.'

He lit a pipe and leaned back in his chair, with an air of resignation.

'So, madame, you have received another letter?'

'Two, inspector. I've brought them along. In one of them, you'll see, she admits she was the person who poisoned my cat, and she says that if I don't move out I'll be next.'

The hands moved slowly round the clock face. He had to pretend to be taking this matter seriously. It lasted a little under a quarter of an hour. Then, just as he was getting up to fetch his hat from the cupboard, there was a knock at the door.

'Are you busy?'

'Hello! What are *you* doing in Paris?'

Lourtie, one of his former inspectors, had recently transferred to the Flying Squad in Nice.

‘Just passing through. I thought I might drop in, sniff the air of headquarters and shake hands with you. Do we have time for a pastis in the Brasserie Dauphine?’

‘Yes, but it’ll have to be a quick one.’

He liked Lourtie, a tall lanky fellow with the voice of a church cantor. In the brasserie, where they stood at the counter, there were already several other inspectors. They chatted about this and that. A pastis was exactly what was needed on a day like today. They had one, then another, then a third.

‘I’ve got to go, I’m expected back home.’

‘I’ll walk along with you, shall I?’

The two men had crossed the Pont Neuf together, then walked to Rue de Rivoli, where it took Maigret a good five minutes to find a taxi. It was ten to one by the time he had finally climbed the three floors to the apartment on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and, as usual, the door opened before he had a chance to take the key out of his pocket.

He had immediately noticed that his wife was looking preoccupied. Speaking in a low voice, since the doors were open, he asked her:

‘Is he still here?’

‘No, he’s gone.’

‘And you don’t know what he wanted?’

‘He didn’t say.’

Had it not been for Madame Maigret’s anxious expression, he would have shrugged his shoulders and muttered:

‘Good riddance!’

But instead of going back into the kitchen and serving the lunch, she followed him into the dining room, looking like someone who has a confession to make.

‘Did you go into the front room this morning?’ she asked him eventually.

‘Me? No. Why?’

Why indeed would he have gone in there before setting off for the office, since he detested the room?

‘I thought not.’

‘So, what’s the matter?’

‘Nothing. I’m trying to remember. I looked in the drawer.’

‘Which drawer?’

‘The one you keep your American revolver in.’

It was only now that he began to suspect the truth. He had spent several weeks in the United States, as a guest of the FBI, and the question of firearms had come up a great deal while he was there. When he left, the Americans had presented him with an automatic of which they were very proud, a Smith & Wesson .45 special, with a short barrel and a very sensitive trigger. It was engraved with his name:

To J.-J. Maigret from his FBI friends.

He had never used it. But the day before, it just so happened that he had taken it out of the drawer to show someone, a former schoolfriend whom he had invited round for a drink after dinner. And he had taken the visitor into the front room.

'Why does it say "J.-J. Maigret"?' the guest had asked.

He too had asked that question when he had been given the gun, during a cocktail party in his honour. The Americans, who usually have two first names, had found out his own. Only the first two, fortunately: Jules-Joseph. In fact, he had a third name: Anthelme.

'Do you mean my revolver isn't there now?'

'I'll explain.'

Before letting her speak, he went into the front room, which still smelled of cigarette smoke, and glanced at the mantelpiece, where he remembered having placed the gun the night before. It wasn't there. But he was sure he hadn't put it away.

'What's all this about?'

'Sit down first, and let me serve the food, or the roast will be overdone. Please don't be cross.'

He was already cross.

'I do think it's going a bit far, to let a stranger in and—'

She left the room and returned with the dish for their midday meal.

'If you'd seen him—'

'How old?'

'Very young. Nineteen? Twenty perhaps?'

'And what did he want?'

'He rang the bell. I was in the kitchen and I thought it was the gas man. I opened the door. He asked if this was the right address for Chief Inspector Maigret. I gathered from the way he behaved that he thought I was the maid. He looked nervous, scared almost.'

‘And you showed him into the front room.’

‘Because he said he absolutely needed to see you to ask your advice. I told him he should go to your office. But apparently it was too personal.’

Maigret still looked irritated, but began to feel like smiling. He could imagine the young man, in a state of panic, and Madame Maigret immediately taking pity on him.

‘What was he like?’

‘A very nice boy. I don’t quite know what to say. Not rich, but well brought up. I’m sure he had been crying. He took out a packet of cigarettes, then apologized at once. So I said:

‘“It’s all right, I’m used to it, you can smoke if you like.”

‘Then I promised to phone you, to check whether you would be coming home.’

‘And the revolver was still on the mantelpiece?’

‘Yes, I’m sure it was. I didn’t notice it just then, but I remember it was there when I was dusting at about nine o’clock, and nobody else has been in here.’

If she had not put the revolver back in its drawer, it was, he knew, because she had never been able to get used to firearms. Even if she had been assured it wasn’t loaded, she would not have touched it for anything in the world.

He could imagine the scene. His wife going into the dining room and talking to him in a low voice on the phone, then returning to say:

‘He’ll be back in half an hour at latest.’

Maigret asked:

‘Did you leave him on his own in here?’

‘Well yes, I had the lunch to see to.’

‘When did he leave?’

‘That’s just it, I don’t know. There was a moment when I was frying the onions and I closed the kitchen door, for the smell not to spread. Then I went into the bedroom to freshen up. I thought he was still there. Perhaps he was. I didn’t want to embarrass him by going into the front room again. It was only a little after half past twelve when I thought I’d go and tell him to be patient, and then I realized he wasn’t there. Are you angry with me?’

Angry with her for what?

‘What do you think this is about? He really didn’t look like a thief.’

No, he couldn't have been one, for heaven's sake! How would a thief ever have guessed that that very morning there would be an automatic on the mantelpiece in the Maigrets' front room?

'You look anxious. Was the gun loaded?'

'No.'

'Well, then?'

Not worth replying. Someone who takes the trouble to get hold of a revolver intends sooner or later to use it. Maigret wiped his lips, stood up and went to look in the drawer, where he found the cartridges in their place. Before sitting down again, he telephoned the office.

'Torrence, is that you? Can you call up all the gunsmiths in the city? Hello? . . . Yes, I said gunsmiths. Ask whether anyone has come in wanting to buy cartridges for a Smith & Wesson .45 special . . . What? . . . Yes, a .45 special. In case nobody has turned up yet, tell them that if someone *does* come in this afternoon or tomorrow, they should keep them waiting somehow or other, and contact the nearest police station . . . Yes. That's all. I'll be in the office as usual.'

When he arrived back at Quai des Orfèvres at about half past two, Torrence already had the answer. A young man had walked into a gunsmith's on Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, but they didn't have the calibre he asked for and had sent him on to the well-known firm of Gastinne-Renette. And there, they had sold him a boxful.

'Did the boy show the gun to anyone?'

'No, he just gave them a piece of paper with the make and calibre written on it.'

Maigret had various matters to see to that afternoon. At about five o'clock, he went upstairs to the laboratory. Jussieu, the director, asked him:

'Are you going to Pardon's this evening?'

'It's brandade of cod!' Maigret replied. 'Pardon phoned me the day before yesterday.'

'Me too. But I don't think Doctor Paul will be able to come.'

In the life of married couples, there are times when you see a great deal of another couple, then lose touch for no reason.

For about a year now, once a month, the Maigrets had been regularly visiting the Pardons, for what they called 'the doctors' dinner'. It was this same Jussieu, the director of the forensic service,

who had first taken Maigret to Doctor Pardon's apartment on Boulevard Voltaire.

'You'll see! You'll like him. He's a very competent chap, who could have become a leading consultant. In any field, I could almost say, since after being a houseman at the Val-de-Grâce and assistant to Lebraz, he was at the Sainte-Anne Institute for five years.'

'And now?'

'He's in general practice by choice; he works twelve to fifteen hours a day without caring whether the patients can afford to pay him, and he often forgets to send them his bill. Apart from that, his only passion is cooking.'

Two days later, Jussieu had telephoned.

'Do you like cassoulet?'

'Why?'

'Pardon has invited us for tomorrow. When you dine at his house, you just have one main dish, usually some regional speciality, and he likes to know in advance whether his guests will like it.'

'Cassoulet will do very well.'

Since then there had been more dinners: coq au vin, couscous, sole Dieppoise, and other dishes.

This time it was brandade of cod. Now who was it that Maigret was going to meet tonight, he tried to recall? Pardon had telephoned him two days before.

'Will you be free the day after tomorrow? Do you like fish? Are you for or against truffles?'

'For.'

They had got into the habit of addressing each other as 'Maigret' and 'Pardon', although their wives were on first-name terms. The two couples were near enough in age. Jussieu was ten years younger and Doctor Paul, the pathologist who often joined them, older.

'Tell me, Maigret, you wouldn't mind meeting one of my old schoolfriends, would you?'

'Why should I mind?'

'I don't know. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have invited him, except that he asked me to find a way of introducing him to you. He came to see me at the practice just now, because he's also one of my patients, and he was very insistent to know whether you would definitely be there.'

At half past seven that evening, Madame Maigret, who had

changed into a flowered dress and a fetching straw hat, was putting on her white cotton gloves.

'Are you coming?'

'I'm right behind you.'

'Are you still worrying about that young man?'

'No, not at all.'

One of the agreeable things about these dinners was that the Pardons lived only five minutes' walk away. The sun was reflecting off the upper windows. The streets smelled warm and dusty. Children were still playing out of doors and families had brought chairs on to the pavement to take the air.

'Don't walk so fast.'

He always walked too quickly for her.

'Are you sure that was him buying the cartridges?'

Since that morning, and especially after he had told her about the visit to Gastinne-Renette, there had been a weight on her mind.

'You don't think he means to kill himself, do you?'

'Let's change the subject, shall we?'

'It's just that he was so nervous! His cigarette ends in the ashtray were in shreds.'

The air felt mild and Maigret held his hat in his hand as he walked, as if out on a Sunday stroll. They reached Boulevard Voltaire and arrived at the building where the Pardons lived, near the square. They took the lift, which made its usual squeak on starting up, and Madame Maigret gave her usual little jump.

'Come in. My husband will be back in a few minutes. He was called out urgently, but it's just round the corner.'

It was rare for one of their dinners to take place without the doctor being summoned. He would say:

'Don't wait for me.'

And they would often indeed leave without seeing him again.

Jussieu was already there, alone in the drawing room, where there was a grand piano and embroidered covers on all the furniture. Pardon came bustling in a few minutes later, and disappeared straight into the kitchen.

'Hasn't Lagrange arrived?'

Pardon was a small man, quite portly, with a large head and prominent eyes.

'Now, wait, I want to try something out on you, and I'd like your opinion on it.'

There was invariably a surprise at Pardon's dinners, perhaps a special wine or liqueur, or in this case a Pineau des Charentes which a vineyard owner in Jonzac had sent him.

'None for me!' protested Madame Maigret, who was usually tipsy after a single glass.

They chatted over the wine. Here too, the windows were open; life was going on at a leisurely pace on the boulevard, the air was golden and the light gradually faded into a rosy glow.

'Well, I wonder what's become of Lagrange.'

'Who is he?'

'I know him from when we were both at the Lycée Henri-IV. If I remember rightly, he had to leave after the fourth year. He was living in Rue Cuvier then, just by the Jardin des Plantes, and I was impressed by his father because he was a baron, at least he claimed to be. I lost touch with Lagrange for a long time, more than twenty years, and it was just a few months ago that he showed up at my surgery, waiting for his turn to see me like everyone else. But I recognized him at once.'

He looked at his watch, then at the clock.

'What surprises me is that he was so insistent about coming and now he isn't here. If he doesn't come in the next five minutes, we'll start eating.'

He refilled the glasses. Madame Maigret and Madame Pardon said nothing. While Madame Pardon was slim and Maigret's wife a little on the plump side, they both displayed the same self-effacing attitude vis-a-vis their husbands. It was unusual for either of them to speak up during dinner, and it was only afterwards that they went into a corner of the room to talk quietly. Madame Pardon had a very long nose, excessively long, indeed, and you had to get used to it. At first, it was actually embarrassing to look at her face. Was it because of this nose, which must have made her the target of much mockery from her classmates, that she was so modest and looked at her husband as if she was thanking him for having married her?

'I'm prepared to bet,' Pardon was saying, 'that all of us here had a friend at school who was like Lagrange. Out of twenty or thirty boys, there's always at least one who is already fat at thirteen, with a podgy face and big pink legs!'

'Well, in my class, it was me!' Madame Maigret ventured to say.

And Pardon gallantly replied:

'In the case of girls, it sorts itself out. And they are often the

prettiest ones in the end. We used to call François Lagrange “Baby Cadum”, and there must have been thousands like him all over France nicknamed that at the time, because of the advertisements for Cadum Baby Soap, with that huge pink baby on them!’

‘And he hasn’t changed?’

‘The proportions have changed, of course. But he’s still a podge. Never mind, let’s start eating.’

‘Why not telephone him?’

‘Because he doesn’t have a phone.’

‘Does he live nearby?’

‘Not far away, Rue Popincourt. I wonder what it is he wants exactly. The other day, in my waiting room, there happened to be a newspaper with your photo on the front page.’

Pardon was looking at Maigret.

‘Forgive me, my friend. I don’t quite know how it happened, but I mentioned that I knew you. I may even have added that you were a friend of mine.

‘“And is he really like they say?” Lagrange asked me.

‘I said yes, you were a man who . . .’

‘Who what?’

‘Oh never mind, I just said what I thought while I was examining him. He has diabetes. And some glandular problems. He comes in a couple of times a week, because he’s very anxious about his health. The next time he was there, he talked about you again, wanted to know if I saw you often, and I said we had dinner together once a month. And that’s when he pressed me to invite him, which surprised me, since we hadn’t seen each other since Henri-IV, and my only contact with him was at the surgery. Let’s eat.’

The brandade of cod was delicious and Pardon had managed to track down a dry white wine from the Nice region that made a perfect accompaniment. After the mention of overweight people, the conversation turned to redheads.

‘Yes, there’s always one redhead in every class at school!’

This led to the topic of genetic theory. They usually ended up talking about medicine, and Madame Maigret knew that her husband enjoyed that.

‘Married, is he?’

With their coffee, they had returned to the subject of Lagrange, for some reason. The blue of the evening, a deep velvety blue, had gradually taken over from the crimson sunset; but they had not yet

lit the lamps, and through the French windows they could see the wrought-iron curlicues of the balcony balustrade outlined in black. From the corner of a nearby street came the strains of an accordion, and on a neighbouring balcony, the low voices of a couple in conversation.

'He was, he told me, but his wife died long ago.'

'What does he do?'

'He's in business, rather vague business, probably. His visiting card says "Financial administrator", and gives an address in Rue Tronchet. I rang the number one day to cancel an appointment, and I was told that those offices had not existed for many years.'

'Children?'

'Two or three. A daughter notably, if I remember correctly, and a boy for whom he was hoping to find a steady job.'

The talk returned to medicine. Jussieu, who had also worked at the Sainte-Anne Institute, recalled memories of the celebrated Doctor Charcot. Madame Pardon was knitting and explaining some tricky stitch to Madame Maigret. They lit the lamps. There were a few mosquitoes, and it was eleven o'clock when Maigret rose to leave.

They left Jussieu at the corner of the boulevard, since he was taking the Métro from Place Voltaire. Maigret was feeling a little full, because of the brandade, or perhaps because of the southern wine.

His wife had taken his arm, something she hardly ever did unless they were walking home and she wanted to say something. How could he tell? She hadn't opened her mouth, but he was nevertheless waiting for her to.

'What are you thinking about?' he finally grunted.

'You won't be angry?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I'm thinking about that young man this morning. I was wondering whether, when we get home, you might telephone to check in case anything has happened.'

She was expressing herself obliquely, but he understood. She meant 'to check he hasn't killed himself'.

Curiously enough, that was not what Maigret thought might have occurred. It was just a feeling, without any firm basis, but he had not been imagining a suicide. He *was* vaguely anxious, but reluctant to let it show.

‘What was he wearing?’

‘I didn’t pay attention to his clothes. But I think he was wearing something dark, navy blue perhaps.’

‘His hair?’

‘Fairish. Well, blond.’

‘Thin?’

‘Yes.

‘Nice-looking boy?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

He would have sworn that she was blushing.

‘Oh, I didn’t look closely at him, you know. But I remember his hands most of all, because he was so nervous, fiddling with the brim of his hat. He didn’t dare sit down. I had to push a chair forward for him. He seemed to expect me to throw him out any minute.’

Once they were back home, Maigret telephoned the night desk of the city police, where all emergency calls were logged.

‘Maigret here. Anything to report?’

‘Just the usual at Bercy, chief.’

Which meant the drunks outside the Wine Depot at Bercy.

‘Nothing else?’

‘Bit of a fight on Quai de Charenton. Wait a bit. Yes. In the late afternoon, a woman’s corpse was pulled out of the Saint-Martin Canal.’

‘Identified?’

‘Yes. Local prostitute.’

‘And no suicides?’

This was to reassure his wife, who was listening, hat in hand, in the bedroom doorway.

‘No, nothing like that yet. Should I call you if there’s anything new?’

He hesitated. It troubled him to seem interested in this business, even – or perhaps especially – in front of his wife.

‘If you like.’

There were no calls that night. Madame Maigret woke him in the morning with his coffee, and the bedroom windows were already open: they could hear workmen loading crates on to a truck in front of the warehouse opposite.

‘You see, he hasn’t killed himself!’ he said, as if taking his revenge.

‘Perhaps they don’t know about it yet.’

He arrived at Quai des Orfèvres at nine, and met up with colleagues for the daily report in the commissioner’s office. Routine matters only. Paris was quiet. They had a description of the man who had killed the woman pulled out of the canal. His arrest was only a matter of time. They would no doubt find him dead drunk in some bar before the day was out.

At about eleven, there was a call for Maigret.

‘Who is it?’

‘Doctor Pardon.’

At the other end of the line, the doctor seemed hesitant.

‘Forgive me for troubling you at the office. Last night, I was telling you about Lagrange, who had asked to come to dine with us. Well, this morning, on my rounds, I was going past the place he lives, on Rue Popincourt. So I went in, thinking that he had perhaps been taken ill. Hello? Are you there?’

‘Yes, I’m listening.’

‘I wouldn’t have called you, only, after you left last night, my wife told me the story of the young man.’

‘Which young man?’

‘The young man and the revolver. It seems Madame Maigret told my wife that yesterday morning—’

‘Yes. So, what is it?’

‘Lagrange would be furious if he knew I was alerting you. I found him in a queer state. In the first place, he let me knock several times at the door without answering, and I was getting concerned because the concierge had said he was at home. In the end he opened the door, barefoot, in his nightshirt, looking haggard, and he seemed relieved to see that it was me.

‘“I apologize about last night,” he said, going back to bed. “I felt ill. I’m still not feeling well. Did you mention me to the chief inspector?”’

‘And what did you say?’ Maigret asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know. I took his pulse and his blood pressure. He was looking very poorly. He looked, in fact, as if he was in shock. The lodgings were very untidy. He hadn’t had anything to eat, nor even had a cup of coffee. I asked him if he was alone, and he immediately took fright.

‘“Are you afraid I might have a heart attack, is that it?” he asked.

‘“No, no. But I was just a bit surprised—”

‘“At what?”

‘“Don’t your children live with you?”

‘“Only my youngest son. My daughter left home when she was twenty-one. And the older boy is married.”

‘“The younger one is at work, is he?”

‘Then he began to cry, and I got the impression that this big fat man was crumpling up like a pricked balloon.

‘“I don’t know,” he sobbed. “He’s not here. He didn’t come home.”

‘“Since when?”

‘“I don’t know. I’m alone, I’m going to die on my own.”

‘“Where does your son work?”

‘“I don’t even know if he has a job, He never tells me anything. He went out . . .”’

Maigret was listening with a serious expression.

‘And that’s all?’

‘More or less. I tried to reassure him. He was pathetic. As a rule, he keeps up appearances or tries to. Seeing him in these sordid lodgings, lying sick in a bed that hadn’t been made for days—’

‘Is his son in the habit of spending the night away from home?’

‘No, from what I gathered. It would be a coincidence, of course, if it turned out to be this young man who—’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you think?’

‘Nothing for the moment. Is the father genuinely sick?’

‘As I said, he looks as if he’s in shock. His heart’s not too good. He’s lying there in bed, sweating away, and terrified he’s going to die.’

‘You did the right thing phoning me, Pardon.’

‘I was rather afraid you’d laugh at me.’

‘I didn’t know my wife had told anyone about the revolver.’

‘Have I put my foot in it?’

‘Not at all.’

He buzzed the office boy.

‘Nobody waiting to see me?’

‘No, sir. Apart from the madman.’

‘Send him to Lucas.’

This was a regular visitor, a harmless madman who came along every week to offer his services to the police.

Maigret still hesitated. Out of human respect, truth be told. This

story, if you looked at it one way, might indeed seem rather ridiculous.

Once on the embankment, he was on the point of borrowing one of the police drivers, then, still out of a kind of modesty, decided to go to Rue Popincourt by taxi. That made it less official. And that way, there wouldn't be anyone to laugh at him.

2.

Concerning a concierge who shows no curiosity and a gentleman of a certain age who peeps through the keyhole

The concierge's lodge, to the left of the archway, was like a hole in the wall, lit all day long by a yellowish lamp dangling from a wire. Its entire area was taken up with things that seemed to have been fitted together from a construction kit: a stove, a very high bed topped with a red eiderdown, a round table covered with an oilcloth, and an armchair occupied by a large ginger cat.

The concierge did not open the door but observed Maigret through the glass window, and since he did not go away, resigned herself to opening it. Her head then appeared framed by the panel, like an enlarged photograph, faded and out of focus, the kind they take at fairgrounds. Her black hair looked dyed, and her face was colourless and without contours. She waited. He said:

'Monsieur Lagrange, please?'

She did not reply at once, so he thought she might be deaf. Finally, she let fall, in a desperately bored tone:

'Across the courtyard, third floor left.'

'Is he at home?'

It was not so much boredom as indifference, and perhaps contempt, or even hatred, for anything outside her aquarium. She had a whining voice.

'If the doctor came to see him this morning, he's probably in.'

'Nobody else has called since Doctor Pardon?'

Mentioning the name made it seem as if he was well informed.

'He wanted me to go *over* there.'

'Who did?'

'The doctor. He wanted to give me a bit of money to go and do

some cleaning and make a meal.'

'Did you go?'

She shook her head without explaining.

'Why not?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Don't you get on with Monsieur Lagrange?'

'I've only been here two months.'

'Does the previous concierge live round here?'

'She's dead.'

It would be useless, he knew, to try to get any more out of her. To this woman, the entire property, a six-storey apartment block facing the street and a three-storey building at the far end of the courtyard, with its tenants, artisans' workshops, children, comings and goings, all represented the enemy, whose sole reason for existing was to disturb her peace and quiet.

As he came out of the dark, cool entrance, the courtyard looked almost cheerful, there was even grass growing between the cobblestones, and the sun was striking directly on to the façade of the rear building, with its cream-coloured plasterwork. A joiner was sawing wood in his workshop which gave off an agreeable smell, and a baby was asleep in a pram, its mother peering from time to time out of a first-floor window.

Maigret knew the neighbourhood, which was not far from his own, and where there were many similar buildings. In the courtyard at his place in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, there was still an outdoor lavatory without a seat but with the door always ajar, as if in the country.

He went up the three floors slowly, pressed an electric bell and heard it ring inside. Like Pardon, he had to wait. And like him, he finally heard some faint sounds, the slap of bare feet on the floor as someone approached cautiously, then, finally, he could have sworn, some laboured breathing, very close to him, behind the door. Nobody opened it. He rang the bell again. Nothing moved this time and, stooping down, he could see an eye shining through the keyhole.

He coughed, wondering whether to announce his name, then, just as he was opening his mouth, a voice said:

'Just a moment, please.'

More footsteps coming and going, and at last the click of a lock followed by a bolt being drawn back. In the half-open doorway, a

large man in a dressing gown was looking at him.

'Was it Pardon who told you . . . ?' he stammered.

The dressing gown was old and shabby, as were the bedroom slippers. The man was unshaven and his hair was dishevelled.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

The other man made a sign indicating that he had recognized him.

'Come in. My apologies . . .'

He did not say what the apologies were for. They stepped directly into a cluttered sitting room, in which Lagrange seemed hesitant to remain, and Maigret, pointing to the open door of the bedroom, said:

'You can go back to bed, if you like.'

'Yes, I will, thank you.'

The sunlight was shining into this apartment, very different from others of its kind and rather resembling an encampment, without Maigret being able to think quite why.

'I do apologize,' the man repeated, slipping into the rumpled bed.

He was breathing with difficulty. His face was shining with sweat and his large eyes darted here and there. Maigret was not really at ease either.

'Do sit down, on that chair.'

Then, seeing that there was a pair of trousers lying on it, Lagrange once more apologized.

'I'm so sorry.'

Maigret wondered what to do with the trousers, finally dropping them at the end of the bed, then began to speak in a deliberately firm voice.

'Doctor Pardon had told us last night that we would be having the pleasure of meeting you.'

'Yes, I did think—'

'But you were in bed?'

He saw that the other man was hesitating.

'In bed, er, yes.'

'When did you begin to feel unwell?'

'I don't know . . . Yesterday.'

'Yesterday morning?'

'Yes, maybe.'

'Your heart?'

'Everything. Pardon's been treating me for a long time. But yes,

the heart as well.'

'Are you worried about your son?'

Lagrange looked at him, as the fat schoolboy once must have looked at a teacher when he did not know what to answer.

'Didn't he come home?'

Another hesitation.

'No . . . not this time.'

'You wanted to see me?'

Maigret was trying to adopt the casual tones of a man who had just dropped in for a visit. Lagrange, for his part, hazarded a would-be polite smile.

'Yes, I had said to Pardon—'

'Was it because of your son?'

He seemed astonished all at once, and repeated:

'Because of my son?'

Then immediately he shook his head.

'No. I didn't know *then* that—'

'You didn't know that he was going away?'

Lagrange corrected him, as if the expression was too categorical.

'He hasn't come home.'

'Since when? Has he been gone for a few days?'

'No.'

'So since yesterday morning, then?'

'Yes.'

'Had you quarrelled?'

Lagrange was suffering, yet Maigret wanted to push the questions as far as he could.

'No, Alain and I have never had a quarrel.'

He had said that with a kind of pride, something Maigret did not miss.

'What about your other children?'

'They don't live here any more.'

'But before they left?'

'It wasn't the same thing with them.'

'I presume you would be glad if we could trace your son?'

Signs of panic again.

'What are you proposing to do?' the other man asked.

Every now and again, he seemed to have spurts of energy that made him seem almost normal, then he would suddenly collapse limply back on the bed. He went on:

‘No! It’s not necessary, I think it’s better if you don’t—’

‘But you’re worried?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re afraid of dying?’

‘I’m a sick man. I can’t go on. I—’

He put his hand to his heart, and appeared to be feeling for its beating with anxiety.

‘Do you know where your son works?’

‘Not just recently. I didn’t want the doctor to tell you about all this.’

‘And yet a couple of days ago, you were insisting that he arrange for you to meet me.’

‘*I* insisted?’

‘You wanted to talk to me about something, then, is that right?’

‘I was curious to meet you.’

‘And that was all?’

‘I’m so sorry.’

This was the fifth time at least that he had apologized.

‘I’m a sick man, very sick. That’s all, nothing else.’

‘But your son has disappeared.’

Lagrange looked impatient.

‘Perhaps he just did the same as his sister.’

‘And what did she do?’

‘As soon as she reached twenty-one, the very same day, she left home, without a word, taking all her belongings with her.’

‘With a man?’

‘No. She works in a lingerie shop, in the Arcades des Champs-Élysées, and she lodges with a woman friend.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And you have another son, older?’

‘Philippe, yes. He’s married.’

‘And you don’t think that Alain might have gone to him?’

‘They don’t see each other. There’s nothing of any concern here, as I said. It’s just that I’m ill and alone, and I’m ashamed that you’ve been put to trouble. Pardon shouldn’t have told you. I wonder now why I ever said anything to him about Alain. I expect it was because I was feverish. Perhaps I still am. Don’t stay here, please. The place is a mess, and it must reek of sickness. I can’t even offer you a drink.’

‘You don’t have anyone who comes in to do the housework?’

Lagrange was evidently lying when he replied:

‘She hasn’t turned up.’

Maigret did not dare ask if he had any money. It was very warm in the bedroom, and there was a stale and unpleasant smell.

‘Would you like me to open a window?’

‘No, no, that would make it too noisy. I’ve got a headache. In fact, I’m aching all over.’

‘Perhaps it would be best if you were transferred to hospital?’

This word alarmed him.

‘No, absolutely not! I want to stay here.’

‘Waiting for your son?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

It was curious. At one moment, Maigret felt pity for this man, the next he felt only irritation and had a sense that the whole thing was an act. Perhaps the man really was ill, but not, it seemed to the inspector, to the extent that he needed to huddle into his bed like a huge caterpillar, not to the extent that his eyes were full of tears and his lips quivering, like a baby who is about to start crying.

‘Tell me, Lagrange—’

And as he paused, he intercepted a suddenly more determined expression, one of those sharp looks that women in particular dart at you covertly, when they think you have found them out.

‘What?’

‘Are you *sure* that when you asked Pardon to invite you round to meet me, you didn’t have something you wanted to tell me?’

‘No, I swear, it was just a sort of passing remark . . .’

He was lying: that was why he felt the need to swear to it. Like a woman again.

‘And you have nothing you can tell me that would help us find your son?’

There was a chest of drawers in the corner and Maigret, standing up, went over to it, feeling the other man’s eyes glued to him.

‘Still, I’m just going to ask you to let me borrow a photograph of him.’

Lagrange was about to reply that he didn’t have one. Maigret was so sure of himself that with an almost reflex movement he opened one of the drawers.

‘In here?’

There was a bit of everything in there, keys, an old wallet, a

cardboard box full of buttons, some papers in disorder, gas and electricity bills.

'Give me that.'

'What?'

'The wallet.'

Fearing that the inspector would look inside it himself, Lagrange summoned up the strength to lean on his elbow.

'Pass it to me, I think there's a photo from last year.'

He was looking frantic.

His thick fingers fumbled. From a little pocket, where he clearly knew he would find it, he pulled out a photograph.

'You're the one who's insisting. I'm sure there's nothing wrong. There is no need to announce anything in the newspapers. I don't want anything done.'

'I'll bring it back to you this evening or tomorrow.'

That frightened him again.

'There's no hurry.'

'How will you manage for food?'

'I'm not hungry. I don't need anything.'

'What about this evening?'

'I'll probably feel better by then, so I'll be able to go out.'

'What if you *don't* feel better?'

The man was on the brink of bursting into tears from stress and impatience, and Maigret hadn't the heart to impose on him any longer.

'Just one question. Where was the last workplace of your son Alain?'

'I don't know the name. It was some office in Rue Réaumur.'

'What kind of office?'

'Advertising. Yes, that's it, it must be an advertising agency.'

He made as if to get up to see his visitor to the door.

'Don't trouble yourself. Good day, Monsieur Lagrange.'

'Goodbye, inspector. Please don't hold this against me.'

Maigret almost asked:

'Hold what against you?'

But what was the point? He stood still for a moment on the landing, relighting his pipe, and heard the bare feet on the floor, the key turning in the lock, and the bolt being shot, and perhaps too a sigh of relief.

As he was passing the concierge's lodge, he saw her head framed

in the window, hesitated, then stopped.

'It might be a good idea if, as the doctor suggested, you were to go up now and then to see if he needs anything. He really is ill.'

'Well, he wasn't ill last night, when I thought he was doing a moonlight flit!'

It had been the merest of chances. Maigret, who had been on the point of walking away, frowned and moved closer.

'He went out last night?'

'He was even strong enough to carry out a big trunk, with the help of a taxi-driver.'

'And you spoke to him?'

'No.'

'What time was this?'

'About ten o'clock. I hoped he really was moving out, so the apartment would be free.'

'And you heard him come back?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Of course. He's up there now, isn't he?'

'With his trunk?'

'No.'

Maigret was too near home to take a taxi. Passing in front of a café, he remembered yesterday's pastis, which had seemed to chime so well with the warmth of early summer, so he had a glass at the counter, gazing without seeing them at the workmen in white overalls drinking alongside him.

As he crossed his own boulevard, he looked up and saw Madame Maigret coming and going in their apartment with the windows open. She must have seen him as well. At any rate, she recognized his step on the stairs, since the door opened as he reached it.

'Nothing's happened to him, has it?'

She was still thinking about the young man of the day before, and her husband took the photo from his pocket and showed it to her.

'Is that him?'

'How did you manage that?'

'Is it him?'

'Yes, of course it's him. Is he . . .'

She must already be imagining the young man was dead, and she looked devastated.

'No, no, he's still on the loose somewhere. I've just been visiting his father.'

‘Is that the man the doctor was talking about yesterday?’

‘Lagrange, yes.’

‘And what did he have to say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘So you still don’t know why he took your revolver?’

‘To use it, probably.’

He telephoned the Police Judiciaire, but there had been no report of anything that might concern Alain Lagrange. He ate his lunch quickly, took a taxi to Quai des Orfèvres, and went straight up to the photographic department.

‘Print me off as many copies as we need to circulate to the whole of the Paris police.’

He almost changed his mind and considered circulating the photo throughout France, but wasn’t that to give too much importance to this case? What troubled him was that nothing had actually happened, except that his automatic had been taken.

A little later he called Lucas into his office. Maigret had taken off his jacket and was smoking his largest pipe.

‘I want you to check out the taxi-drivers who work nights in the Popincourt neighbourhood. There’s a rank on Place Voltaire. It must be that one. At this time of day, the night-time drivers will mostly be at home.’

‘What do I ask them?’

‘Whether last night at about ten p.m. any of them loaded a large trunk from a building in Rue Popincourt. I want to know where it was taken.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘Ask as well if he took his fare back again to Rue Popincourt.’

‘OK, chief.’

By three o’clock, the radio-cars were already in possession of the photograph of Alain Lagrange; by four o’clock, it arrived at the police stations and substations with the comment: ‘Caution! This man is armed.’ By six o’clock, all the Parisian officers coming on shift would have copies in their pockets.

As for Maigret, he was not sure what to do next. Some kind of inhibition was preventing him from taking this matter seriously, and yet at the same time he was ill at ease in his office. It seemed to him that he was wasting time when he ought to have been taking action.

He would have liked to have a long conversation with Pardon

about the Lagrange family, but at this time of day the doctor's waiting room would be full of patients. He would feel awkward at interrupting a consultation. Nor did he really know what questions he would ask.

He leafed through the telephone directory and found three advertising agencies in Rue Réaumur, noting them down almost automatically in his jotter.

'Nothing for me, chief?' Torrence came to ask him a little later.

If it hadn't been for that, he would not have asked him to check the agencies.

'Telephone these three places to ask which one has employed a young man called Alain Lagrange. If one of them says they have, go over there and find out anything you can about him. Not from the directors, they never know much, but from the other employees.'

He hung about for another half-hour in his office, finishing off trivial tasks. Then he had a visit from a priest who complained that someone was stealing from the poor box in his church. To receive the priest, he had put his jacket back on. And once alone again, he went out as well, and took one of the police cars waiting on the embankment.

'Take me to the Arcades des Champs-Élysées!'

The pavements were crowded with shoppers. At the entrance to the Arcades, there were more tourists speaking foreign languages than French people. He rarely came here and was surprised to find that in a stretch of less than a hundred metres there were no fewer than five lingerie shops. He was embarrassed about going in. He had the impression that the salesgirls were eyeing him quizzically.

'Do you have a Mademoiselle Lagrange working here?'

'Is this personal?'

'Yes. Well, I mean . . .'

'We have a Lajaunie, Berthe Lajaunie, but she's on holiday.'

In the third shop, a pretty girl raised her head at once and said, already on the defensive:

'That's me. What do you want?'

She looked nothing like her father. Possibly she resembled her brother Alain, though with a very different expression, and without knowing why, Maigret felt sorry for any man who might fall in love with her. At first sight, admittedly, she had a pleasant enough manner, especially when wearing her salesgirl's smile. But behind this surface amiability, he guessed that this was a hard woman,

possessed of astonishing sang-froid.

'Have you seen your brother lately?'

'Why do you want to know that?'

She glanced towards the back of the shop where her boss was in a fitting room with a customer. Dispensing with the niceties, he preferred to show her his badge.

'Has he done anything wrong?' she asked, lowering her voice.

'You mean Alain?' Maigret asked.

'Who told you I worked here?'

'Your father.'

She did not take long to think.

'If you really need to talk to me, wait for me somewhere for half an hour.'

'I'll wait on the terrace of the café Le Français.'

She watched him leave, without moving but with a furrowed brow, and Maigret spent the next thirty-five minutes gazing at the passers-by and shifting his legs every time a waiter or a customer needed to get past. She arrived wearing a light-coloured two-piece outfit and a determined expression. He had been sure she would come. She was not the kind of girl to run away, nor, once she had arrived, to betray any awkwardness. She sat on the chair he had saved for her.

'What will you have?'

'A glass of port.'

She smoothed her hair back either side of the little hat she was wearing, and crossed her shapely legs.

'You know your father is ill?'

'He's been ill for ever.'

There was no pity or emotion in her voice.

'He's in bed.'

'I dare say.'

'And your brother has disappeared.'

He noted that she gave a start, since this news had taken her aback more than she wanted to admit.

'It doesn't surprise you?'

'Nothing surprises me any more.'

'Why not?'

'I've seen too much. What is it exactly you want from me?'

It was hard to reply straight away to such a direct question, as she calmly took a cigarette out of a case and said:

‘Have you got a light?’

He held out a lit match.

‘I’m waiting.’

‘How old are you?’

‘I don’t suppose you took the trouble to come here to find out my age. From your badge you’re not an ordinary inspector but a chief, someone important.’

Then, as she looked at him more closely:

‘You’re not the famous Maigret, are you?’

‘I am Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, yes.’

‘Has Alain killed someone?’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Because if you are handling this affair, I presume it’s something serious.’

‘Your brother might be a victim.’

‘He’s really been killed, you mean?’

Still no emotion. It was true that she did not seem to believe it.

‘He’s wandering around Paris somewhere with a loaded revolver.’

‘There could be quite a few people doing that, don’t you think?

‘He stole this revolver yesterday morning.’

‘Where from?’

‘From me.’

‘He came to see you? To your home?’

‘Yes.’

‘When there was nobody in? You mean he burgled your place?’

This seemed to amuse her. An ironic expression passed across her face.

‘And you feel no more affection for Alain than you do for your father?’

‘I feel no affection for anybody, myself included.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-one and seven months.’

‘So it’s seven months since you left your father’s home?’

‘Call that a home? Have you been there?’

‘Do you think your brother is capable of killing someone?’

Was it to sound intriguing that she replied, with a mocking air:

‘Why not? Everyone’s *capable* of it, don’t you think?’

If they had been anywhere but on this café terrace, where a nearby couple was beginning to eavesdrop, he might have shaken her with exasperation.

‘Mademoiselle, did you know your mother?’

‘Hardly. I was three years old when she died, just after Alain was born.’

‘So who brought you up?’

‘My father.’

‘He looked after three children on his own?’

‘When he had to.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When he didn’t have enough money to pay a nursemaid. There was a time when we had two maids, but it didn’t last. Sometimes a housekeeper took care of us, sometimes a neighbour. You don’t seem to know much about the family.’

‘Did you always live in Rue Popincourt?’

‘We’ve lived anywhere and everywhere, even up by the Bois de Boulogne. We would go up in the world, then down, then back up a bit, until we were really on a downward slope. And now, if you haven’t anything more important to tell me, it’s time I was going, because I’m meeting my friend.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Just round the corner, Rue de Berri.’

‘In a hotel?’

‘No, we each have a room in a private house. I suppose you’ll be wanting the exact address.’

She gave it to him.

‘Well, it was interesting to meet you, all the same. You get these ideas about people.’

He dared not ask what idea she had had about him, let alone what she thought now. She stood up, in her figure-hugging suit, and the other customers looked at her, then at Maigret, probably thinking he was a lucky man. He got up in turn and said goodbye to her on the pavement.

‘Thank you,’ he said, reluctantly.

‘You’re welcome. Don’t worry about Alain.’

‘Why not?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Oh, just a notion. I get the feeling that although you’re the famous Maigret, you’ve got a lot to learn.’

And with that, she walked off briskly towards the nearby Rue de Berri without a backward glance. He had not retained the police car. He took the Métro, which was crowded, allowing him to go on

nursing his bad mood. He was out of sorts with everyone, including himself. If he had bumped into Pardon, he would have reproached him for ever having mentioned this Lagrange character, with his look of a fat ghost inflated with air. He was still feeling sore at his wife over the incident with the revolver, and not far off holding her responsible for it.

But none of this should really be concerning him. The Métro smelled of disinfectant. The advertisements, always the same in every station, disgusted him. Outside, the sun was almost baking hot, and he was irritated by the sun as well, for making him sweat. Seeing him come in, the office boy understood that he was in a bad mood and merely nodded discreetly.

On his desk, in a prominent position, and protected from draughts by one of his pipes acting as a paperweight, was a note:

Please telephone the Gare du Nord transport police as soon as possible.

It was signed Lucas.

He picked up the phone, asked for the number, his hat still on his head, and in order to light his pipe he cradled the receiver against his shoulder.

'Is Lucas still there?'

Maigret had spent the two most tedious years of his life in that police station and knew it inside out. He heard an inspector saying:

'It's for you. Your boss.'

And Lucas:

'Hello! I wondered if you'd be back at the office. I phoned your home as well.'

'Did you find the taxi-driver?'

'Stroke of luck. He told me he was in this bar on Place Voltaire last night when a customer rolled up asking him to take his cab out again, a big fat man, looking important, and he wanted to go to Gare du Nord.'

'To put a trunk in the left luggage?'

'That's right, you've got it. The trunk's still here.'

'Have you opened it?'

'They won't let me.'

'Who?'

'The staff at the station. They want the ticket or else a warrant.'

'Anything special about it?'

‘Yes, there is. It stinks!’

‘You mean . . . ?’

‘What you think, yes. If it isn’t a corpse, the trunk must be full of rotten meat. Shall I wait?’

‘I’ll be there in half an hour.’

Maigret went to the chief’s office. The latter telephoned the law courts. The examining magistrate had just left, but one of his deputies eventually agreed to take responsibility.

When Maigret came back into the inspectors’ office, Torrence had not returned yet. Janvier was writing a report.

‘Take someone with you. Go to 37a, Rue Popincourt. It’s to do with a certain François Lagrange, who lives on the third floor left, across the courtyard. But don’t let him see you. He’s a big fat man, and looks unhealthy. Take a photo of the son with you.’

‘What do we do about him?’

‘Nothing. If the son should happen to come in and leave again, follow him discreetly. He’s armed. If the father goes out, though I’d be surprised if he does, follow him too.’

A few minutes later, Maigret was being driven to Gare du Nord. He recalled what Lagrange’s daughter had said on the café terrace on the Champs-Élysées:

‘Everyone’s *capable* of it, don’t you think?’

Or something like that. And now it seemed someone had indeed been killed.

He threaded his way through the crowds and found Lucas chatting casually to an inspector from the transport police.

‘Got a warrant, chief? I warn you, the man in charge of left luggage is a stubborn fellow, and the police don’t cut any ice with him.’

That turned out to be true. The clerk fingered the document, turning it this way and that, and put on his glasses to examine the signature and the seals.

‘Well, as long as it’s clear it’s not my responsibility . . .’

With a resigned but disapproving gesture, he pointed to a large old-fashioned grey trunk, its canvas torn in places, tied up with rope. Lucas had exaggerated, saying it stank, but there was a stale smell coming from it which Maigret well recognized.

‘I suppose you’re not going to open it here?’

It was rush hour, and people were thronging to the ticket barriers.

‘Do you have someone here who can help us?’ Maigret asked the clerk.

‘There are porters on the station. You don’t expect me to carry it myself, do you?’

The trunk wouldn’t go into the small police car from headquarters. Lucas had it put in a taxi. It was all rather irregular. Maigret wanted to move fast.

‘Where’ll we take it, chief?’

‘To the lab, that’ll be the most practical thing. Jussieu’s probably still there.’

He met Torrence on the stairs.

‘Chief, something—’

‘You found him?’

‘Who?’

‘The young man.’

‘No, but—’

‘Then it can wait.’

Jussieu was indeed still there. There were four or five people around the trunk, taking photographs from every angle and trying out different approaches before opening it.

Half an hour later, Maigret telephoned the commissioner’s office.

‘He’s just left,’ he was told.

Maigret called his home number, and learned that he was due to dine at a restaurant on the Left Bank. The restaurant reported that he had not yet arrived. They had to wait another ten minutes.

‘Forgive me for disturbing you, sir. Maigret here. It’s about the business I mentioned to you. Lucas was right. I think you should come over, because it’s someone important, and it might cause a stir.’

He paused.

‘It’s André Delteil, the politician . . . Yes, I’m sure . . . Very well . . . Yes, I’ll wait for you.’

3.

Concerning someone as inconvenient in death as in life and Maigret's sleepless night

The Paris prefect of police was attending a dinner for foreign journalists in a grand hotel on Avenue Montaigne when the head of the Police Judiciaire managed to track him down by telephone. His immediate reaction was one word:

'S—!'

Then there was a silence.

'I hope the press isn't on to it yet,' he finally muttered.

'Not yet, no. There's a reporter prowling round our corridors, he knows something's up. We won't be able to hide from him much longer what it's about.'

The journalist, Gérard Lombras, a hack reporter who specialized in minor scoops, always came round to Quai des Orfèvres in the evening and was sitting on the top step of the staircase, just opposite the door of the laboratory, patiently smoking his pipe.

'Don't say a word and don't do anything until you hear from me,' the prefect ordered.

Then, from one of the telephone cabins in the hotel, he in turn called the minister of the interior. This was going to be a night of interrupted dinners, and yet it was a beautiful warm evening, with the streets of Paris full of strollers. Some of those walking along the embankments must have wondered why there were so many lights on in the offices of the old Palais de Justice building, although it was not yet dark.

The minister of the interior, who was from the Cantal area and still retained his regional accent and blunt speech, had exclaimed on hearing the news:

‘Even when he’s dead, this one’s a pain in the a—!’

The Delteils lived in a large town-house on Boulevard Suchet, at the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. When Maigret finally obtained permission to telephone the residence, a valet told him that Madame was not in Paris.

‘Any idea when she’ll be back?’

‘Not before the autumn. She’s in Miami. Monsieur isn’t here either.’

Maigret asked, on the off-chance:

‘You don’t know where he is, do you?’

‘No.’

‘Was he in Paris yesterday?’

A hesitation.

‘I’m not sure.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Monsieur went out.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘The night before last?’

‘Yes, I think so. Who is this, please?’

‘I’m calling from Paris police headquarters.’

‘I don’t know anything. Monsieur’s not here.’

‘Does he have any family in Paris?’

‘Yes, his brother, Monsieur Pierre.’

‘Can you give me his address?’

‘I think he lives near Place de l’Étoile. I can give you his telephone number. Wait a minute . . . Balzac 51-02.’

‘And you weren’t surprised when your employer did not come home?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Had he told you he wouldn’t be home?’

‘No, sir.’

Some new faces were turning up at the lab. The examining magistrate, Rateau, summoned from a friend’s house where he had been playing bridge, had just arrived, as had the public prosecutor, and they were talking to each other in low voices. Doctor Paul, the pathologist, who had also been dining out, was one of the last to appear, his eternal cigarette in his mouth.

‘Should I take him away?’ he asked, pointing to the trunk in which the corpse still lay curled up.

‘As soon as you have noted your initial findings.’

‘Well, I can tell you for a start this isn’t a fresh one from today. Oh, Good Lord! It’s Delteil!’

‘Yes indeed.’

A ‘yes indeed’ that spoke volumes. Ten years earlier, none of those present would have been able to recognize the dead man. In those days, he had been a young lawyer more likely to be found at the Roland-Garros tennis courts, or in a café on the Champs-Élysées, than in the Palais de Justice, and he looked more like a film star than a member of the Paris bar.

A little later, he had married a wealthy American woman, moved into the house on Boulevard Suchet, and three years after that had stood for election to the National Assembly. Even his opponents, during the electoral campaign, had not taken him seriously.

But he had been elected, by a slim majority, and overnight had started to make waves.

He did not belong to any political party but had become the scourge of them all, forever challenging people, revealing corruption, shady deals, scandals, without anyone being able to discover exactly what his motives were.

At the beginning of any important debate, deputies and ministers would be asking:

‘Is Delteil here?’

And their faces would cloud over. If he was there, with his Hollywood tan and film-star looks, his slim dark moustache curled up at the ends, it meant there would be a lively session.

Maigret was looking grumpy. He had called the brother’s number, a furnished town-house on Rue de Ponthieu, and had been told to try Fouquet’s. Fouquet’s sent him to Maxim’s.

‘Is Monsieur Pierre Delteil there?’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘Tell him it’s about his brother.’

He finally got the other man on the line. The message must have reached him in garbled form.

‘That you, André?’

‘No, this is the Police Judiciaire. Can you take a taxi and come over here at once?’

‘I’ve got my car outside. What’s this about?’

‘Your brother.’

‘Has something happened to him?’

‘Don’t speak to anyone until you’ve seen me.’

‘But—’

Maigret hung up, and looked irritably at the groups of men who had gathered in the large room, then, since he was not needed immediately, went back down to his office. The journalist Lombras followed closely on his heels.

‘You won’t forget me, inspector?’

‘No.’

‘In another hour, it’ll be too late for my edition.’

‘I’ll see you before that.’

‘Who is it? A bigwig?’

‘Yes.’

Torrence was waiting, but before speaking to him Maigret telephoned his wife.

‘Don’t count on me for this evening, or probably all night.’

‘I thought so, since you didn’t come home.’

A silence. He knew what, or rather who, she was thinking about.

‘Is it him?’

‘Well, at any rate, he hasn’t killed himself yet.’

‘Has he shot someone?’

‘That I don’t know.’

He had not told them the whole story, upstairs. He had no wish to tell it. He would have to spend perhaps another hour having to deal with his tedious superiors, before he could get on with his investigation in peace.

He turned to Torrence.

‘Find the kid?’

‘No. I saw his former boss and colleagues. He only left there three weeks ago.’

‘Why?’

‘He got the sack.’

‘For some misdemeanour?’

‘No, it seems he’s honest, all right. But recently, he was always calling in absent. At first they didn’t hold it against him. Everyone seemed to like him. But as he started taking more and more time off . . .’

‘And you didn’t find out anything about where he was going, the company he was keeping?’

‘No, nothing.’

‘No girlfriend?’

‘He never talked about his private life.’

‘And no little dalliance with one of the typists?’

‘One of them, not specially pretty, blushed when she mentioned him, but I got the impression he hadn’t noticed her.’

Maigret picked up the telephone.

‘Madame Pardon? Hello, Maigret speaking. Is your husband there? Busy day? Would you mind asking him to come to the phone?’

He was wondering whether the doctor had by chance returned later on to Rue Popincourt.

‘That you, Pardon? Sorry to bother you, old man. Do you have patients to see tonight? . . . Listen. Something serious has come up, in connection with your friend Lagrange . . . Yes . . . I saw him. But since I was over there, there’s been a new development. I need your help. That’s right . . . I’d prefer it if you could pick me up from here . . .’

When he went back upstairs, still pursued by Lombras, he saw in the corridor Pierre Delteil, whom he recognized because of his resemblance to his brother.

‘Was it you that asked me to come?’

‘Hush!’ He indicated the reporter. ‘Follow me.’

He took the other man up to the laboratory and pushed open the door, just as Doctor Paul, who had been conducting a preliminary examination of the body, was straightening up.

‘Do you recognize him?’

Everyone fell silent. The scene was the more painful because of the resemblance between the two men.

‘Who did this?’

‘Is it your brother?’

No tears, but he clenched his fists and tightened his jaw, and his eyes stared fiercely.

‘Who did this?’ asked Pierre Delteil again. He was three or four years younger than the politician.

‘We don’t know yet.’

Doctor Paul explained:

‘The bullet entered the right eye and lodged in the brain without exiting. As far as I can see, it must have been a small-calibre bullet.’

The commissioner was using one of the telephones to call the prefect of police. When he returned to the waiting group, he passed on the instructions from the minister.

‘The press release must be as simple as we can make it. We announce that the politician André Delteil has been found dead inside a trunk left at Gare du Nord. As few details as possible. There’ll be time for that tomorrow.’

Investigating magistrate Rateau drew Maigret aside.

‘Do you think this is a political crime?’

‘No.’

‘Woman involved, perhaps?’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘Do you have a suspect?’

‘I’ll have a better idea tomorrow.’

‘I’m counting on you to keep me briefed. Phone me, even late at night, if there’s anything new. I’ll be in my office from nine a.m. tomorrow.’

Maigret nodded vaguely, and went over to exchange a few words with Doctor Paul.

‘Yes, of course, inspector.’

Paul was preparing to go to the mortuary to proceed with a post-mortem.

All this had taken time. It was ten in the evening when the dark shapes all filed one after another into the dimly lit staircase. The journalist was sticking close to Maigret.

‘Come into my office a moment. You were right. It is a bigwig. The politician André Delteil has been murdered.’

‘When?’

‘We don’t know that yet. He was shot in the head. His body was found in a trunk which had been deposited in the left luggage at Gare du Nord.’

‘Why was the trunk opened?’

The reporter had immediately caught on.

‘I have nothing else to say for today.’

‘Have you got any leads?’

‘I have nothing else to say for today.’

‘Are you going to be working all night on this?’

‘Possibly.’

‘What if I follow you round?’

‘In that case, I’ll have you arrested on the first pretext, and you’ll be cooling off in the cells till tomorrow morning.’

‘Understood.’

‘Just as well.’

Pardon knocked at the door, then came in. The reporter asked:

'Who's this?'

'A friend.'

'You won't tell me his name?'

'No.'

They were alone at last and Maigret began by taking off his jacket and lighting his pipe.

'Sit down. Before we go over there, I'd like us to have a little chat, and it had better be here.'

'Lagrange?'

'Yes. A question for you, first of all. Is he really ill, and if so how bad is it?'

'I was expecting that, and I've been thinking about it on the way, because it's not easy to give you a straight answer. He's certainly a sick man. He's had diabetes for ten years.'

'But that doesn't stop him leading a normal life?'

'More or less. I've been treating him with insulin. I've taught him to do his own injections. When he eats out, he always takes pocket scales with him to weigh certain foods. With insulin, that's important.'

'Yes, I know. Anything else?'

'Do you want a diagnosis in technical terms?'

'No.'

'He's always had some glandular deficiency, which is common in most people of his physical build. He's weak-willed, impressionable, easily depressed.'

'And his present condition?'

'That's where it gets more tricky. I was very surprised, this morning, to find him in the state you saw him in. I examined him thoroughly. Although it's under strain, his heart isn't in too bad shape, certainly no worse than a week or two back, when he was going about normally.'

'And have you considered the possibility he might be shamming?'

Pardon had indeed thought of it, as could be seen from his embarrassment. A scrupulous man, he searched for the right words.

'I imagine you have some good reason for considering these questions?'

'I have very serious reasons.'

'His son?'

'I don't know. I'd better give you the facts. Forty-eight hours ago,

possibly a little earlier or later, we'll know soon, a man was killed, more than likely in Lagrange's apartment in Rue Popincourt.'

'Have they identified him?'

'Yes, it's Delteil, the politician.'

'Did they know each other?'

'The investigation will tell us that. But last night, while we were dining at your place and talking about him, François Lagrange fetched a taxi-driver to come round to his door and with the driver's help he carried down a trunk containing the corpse, which he then deposited in the left luggage at Gare du Nord. Does that surprise you?'

'That kind of thing is always surprising.'

'So now you understand why I need to know whether, this morning, when you examined him, François Lagrange was genuinely as ill as he wanted to appear, or whether he was play-acting.'

Pardon stood up.

'Before giving you an answer, I'd like to examine him again. Where is he?'

The doctor was expecting that Lagrange had been brought into one of the offices in the Police Judiciaire.

'Still at home, in bed.'

'He doesn't know?'

'He doesn't know yet that we have found the body.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Go over there with you, if you're willing to accompany me. Did you consider him to be a friend?'

Pardon hesitated, then replied with frankness:

'No!'

'You felt sympathy for him?'

'More like pity. I really didn't enjoy seeing him walk into my surgery. I felt embarrassed, as I always do when I'm faced with someone so weak-willed. But I can't forget that he had to bring up his three children on his own, and when he mentioned his younger son, his voice would shake with emotion.'

'Would you say that was just skin-deep sentimentality?'

'I wondered about it. I don't like men who cry.'

'He has cried in front of you?'

'Yes. In particular after his daughter walked out, without even giving him her address.'

‘I’ve seen her.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing. *She* isn’t the crying type! Will you come with me?’

‘I suppose this will take some time?’

‘It could.’

‘Then do you mind if I ring my wife?’

It was dark by the time they were seated in one of the Préfecture’s police cars. During the drive, both men remained silent, each plunged in thought, and each, no doubt, feeling apprehensive about the scene they would soon be witnessing.

‘Stop at the corner,’ Maigret told the driver.

He recognized Janvier standing opposite number 37a.

‘Where’s your colleague?’

‘I took the precaution of posting him inside the courtyard.’

‘And the concierge?’

‘She’s taking no notice of us.’

Maigret rang the bell, and let Pardon go in first. There was no light on in the lodge by now. The concierge did not ask for their names, but the inspector thought he glimpsed her pale face through the window.

On the third floor, a light was showing in one of the bedrooms.

‘Let’s go up.’

He knocked, being unable to find the doorbell in the dark, since the landing light wasn’t working. Less time than in the morning passed before a voice called:

‘Who is it?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘Just a minute, please.’

Lagrange must be putting on his dressing gown. His hands were trembling, since he had difficulty turning the key in the lock.

‘Have you found Alain?’

Then he saw the doctor in the semi-darkness: his expression changed, and he became even paler than usual. He stood there, not moving, without knowing what to do or say.

‘May we come in?’

Maigret sniffed and recognized the smell that had struck his nostrils, a smell of burned paper. Lagrange’s beard had grown since the morning and the pouches under his eyes were puffier.

‘Because of your state of health,’ the inspector began at last, ‘I didn’t want to see you without being accompanied by your doctor.

Pardon has agreed to come with me. I presume you have no objection to his examining you.'

'He examined me this morning, he knows I'm sick.'

'If you would go back to bed, he will check you over again.'

Lagrange was on the point of protesting, as could be seen from his face, but he finally resigned himself, went back into the bedroom, took off his dressing gown and lay down.

'Let me listen to your chest, please,' said Pardon, gently.

While the doctor was applying his stethoscope, the man stared up at the ceiling. Maigret was walking up and down in the room. The fireplace had a black metal shutter in front and, pulling it up, he saw in the grate the charred remains of some papers which had been forcibly reduced almost to ash with a poker.

From time to time, Pardon murmured professional remarks.

'Turn over . . . Breathe in . . . Deep breath, please . . . Cough.'

There was a door not far from the bed and Maigret pushed it open, to find an unoccupied bedroom, which must have been for one of the children, with a brass bedstead now lacking a mattress. He switched on the light. It had become a kind of lumber room. A pile of magazines was stacked in one corner, with some tattered volumes, including old school books, and a leather suitcase covered in dust. On the right near the window, one patch of the wooden floor, the shape of the trunk at Gare du Nord, was lighter in colour than the rest.

When Maigret returned to the next room, Pardon was standing up, with a preoccupied expression.

'Well?'

He did not reply at once, and avoided the eyes of Lagrange, who was staring at him.

'In all conscience, I believe he is fit enough to answer your questions.'

'Hear that, Lagrange?'

The sick man looked at them in turn, without speaking and his eyes made an impression, like those of a wounded animal, gazing up at men bending over it and trying to understand.

'You know why I'm here?'

Lagrange must have made up his mind, no doubt during the examination, since he remained silent, and not a feature of his face moved.

'Own up, you know perfectly well you've been expecting this

since this morning, and you've made yourself ill with fright.'

Pardon had gone to sit in a corner, elbow on the back of the chair, chin in hand.

'We've found the trunk.'

There was no reaction of shock. Nothing happened. Maigret could not even have sworn to a more intense expression appearing briefly in the other man's eyes.

'I'm not suggesting that you killed André Delteil. You may be innocent of the crime. I know nothing, I fully admit, about whatever happened here, but what I *do* know is that you transported the corpse in the trunk to the left luggage department. In your own interests it would be best if you talked now.'

Still silence, no movement. Maigret turned towards Pardon and glanced at him in discouragement.

'I am even willing to believe that you *are* very sick, that the effort you made last night and the accompanying emotions have seriously upset you. But that's all the more reason why you should tell me frankly what happened.'

Lagrange shut his eyes and opened them again, but his lips did not tremble.

'Your son has run away. If he was the killer, we will soon find him, and your silence won't help him in any way. If it *wasn't* him, it would be preferable in the interest of his own safety that we should know that to be the case. He's armed, and the police are on the alert for him.'

Maigret had stepped closer to the bed, and had perhaps leaned forward a little without realizing it; the man's lips finally moved, he was stammering something.

'What did you say?'

'Don't hit me! You haven't any right to hit me.'

'I have no intention of hitting you, as you know full well.'

'Don't hit me . . . Don't . . .'

Suddenly he threw back the covers and thrashed about, looking as if he were fending off an attack.

'Please don't . . . Don't hit me!'

It was unpleasant and pathetic to watch. Maigret turned to Pardon again, as if asking for advice. But what advice could the doctor give him?

'Listen to me, Lagrange. You're quite lucid. You're not a child. You understand perfectly well what I'm talking about. And you

can't have been as sick as all that earlier on, since you had the energy to burn some compromising papers.'

There was a moment of calm, as if the man was getting his breath back, before he started to throw himself about more frantically, screaming this time:

'Help! Help me! They're hitting me! Don't hit me! Let me go!'

Maigret took hold of one of his wrists.

'Stop this, now, won't you?'

'No! No! No!'

'Will you stop shouting?'

Pardon had stood up and approached the bed as well, looking searchingly at the sick man.

'I don't want to! Leave me alone! I'll wake everyone in the house! I'll tell them . . .'

Pardon murmured in Maigret's ear:

'You're not going to get anything out of him.'

As soon as they moved away from the bed, Lagrange became still again and fell into silence.

They conferred in a corner.

'You think his mind is really deranged?'

'I can't be certain of that.'

'But it's a possibility?'

'It's always a possibility. We need to keep him under observation.'

Lagrange had slightly shifted his head, so as to keep them in sight, and was obviously listening. He must have understood the last few words. He seemed reassured.

But Maigret returned to the attack, although feeling unhopeful.

'Before you take any decision, Lagrange, I must warn you of something. I have an arrest warrant made out in your name. Downstairs, there are two of my men waiting. Unless I have some satisfactory answers to my questions, they will take you to the Special Infirmary attached to the police cells.'

No reaction. Lagrange stared up at the ceiling, with such an absent air that they wondered if he had heard.

'Doctor Pardon will confirm that there are procedures for detecting deception, and they are virtually infallible. You were not insane this morning. Nor when you burned those papers. And you are not insane at this moment, I'm sure of that.'

Was that really a vague smile on the man's lips?

'I did *not* strike you, nor will I. I will just repeat that this attitude

will get you nowhere, and will only attract hostility, if not worse. Now, will you answer my questions?'

'Don't hit me, don't hit me!' the man repeated in a blank voice, like one muttering his prayers.

Maigret, his shoulders drooping despondently, went over to open the window and called down to the inspector waiting in the courtyard.

'Come up here with Janvier!'

He closed the window and went on pacing the room. They heard steps on the stairs.

'If you wish to get dressed, you may do so. If not, we'll have you removed as you are, wrapped in a blanket.'

Lagrange merely kept muttering the same syllables, which became meaningless:

'Don't hit me, don't let them hit me . . .'

'Come in, Janvier. And you, sergeant. You're going to take this man to the Special Infirmary. No point trying to dress him, because he might well start thrashing about again. Better put the handcuffs on him, just in case. And wrap him up in a blanket.'

A door had opened on another floor. A light appeared in the window on the far side of the courtyard, and a woman in her nightdress could be seen leaning out of her window, as a man climbed out of bed behind her.

'Don't let them hit me . . .'

Maigret did not watch but heard the click of the handcuffs, then heavy breathing, footsteps, thuds.

'Don't let them hit me . . . Help, help . . . !'

One of the inspectors must have put his hand over his mouth, or gagged him, since the voice became muffled, then stopped, and the footsteps could be heard going towards the stairs.

The following silence was an awkward one. Maigret's first move was to light his pipe. Then he looked at the unmade bed, one of its sheets dragged into the middle of the room. The old bedroom slippers were still there, and the dressing gown was lying on the floor.

'What do you think, Pardon?'

'You're going to have a hard job.'

'I'm sorry to have got you involved with this. It was an ugly sight.'

As if a detail had come back to him, the doctor murmured:

‘He’s always been terribly afraid of dying.’

‘Ah!’

‘Every week, he would complain of some new symptom, and would ask me a lot of questions about whether it was serious. He bought medical textbooks. They must be about here somewhere.’

And Maigret did indeed find them in one of the drawers in the chest, with bookmarks at certain pages.

‘What will you do?’

‘The first thing is that the Special Infirmary will take charge of him. I’ll continue with my investigation. What I want most of all is to find his son.’

‘You think it might have been him?’

‘No. If Alain had already killed someone, he wouldn’t have needed to steal my automatic. In fact the crime had already been committed before he turned up at my place. The death took place at least forty-eight hours ago, so it must have been on Tuesday night.’

‘Are you going to stay here?’

‘For a few minutes. I’m waiting for the inspectors I asked Janvier to send over. And in an hour I’ll have Doctor Paul’s report.’

It was Torrence who arrived a little later, with two colleagues and men from the crime-scene squad, armed with their equipment. Maigret gave them their instructions while Pardon stood to one side, still looking preoccupied.

‘Are you coming?’

‘I’m following you.’

‘Shall I drop you off?’

‘I just wanted to ask your permission to go to the Special Infirmary. But perhaps my colleagues over there wouldn’t be too happy about that?’

‘On the contrary. Have you got some idea about all this?’

‘No. I’d simply like to see him again, and perhaps have another try. It’s a worrying case.’

It did them good to be out in the fresh air of the street. The two men arrived at Quai des Orfèvres, where Maigret knew there would be more lighted windows than usual. The powerful sports car belonging to Pierre Delteil was still parked alongside. The inspector frowned as he discovered the journalist Lombras on guard in the corridor.

‘The brother’s waiting for you. Still nothing for me?’

‘No, still nothing, sonny boy.’

He had spoken without thinking, since Lombras was almost the same age as himself.

4.

The remainder of the sleepless night and some unpleasant interviews

Pierre Delteil became aggressive straight away. For instance, while Maigret was giving instructions to young Lapointe, who had just come on duty, Delteil stood by the desk, resting his buttocks against it and drumming with his well-manicured fingers on a silver cigarette case. Then, when Maigret called Lapointe back as he reached the door to ask him to order some beer and sandwiches, he stretched his face into a deliberately ironic smile.

It was true that he had had a bad shock, and that since then he had become ever more agitated, to the point that it was tiring to watch him.

'At last!' he cried when the door shut and Maigret sat down behind his desk.

And, as the latter was staring at him as if seeing him for the first time:

'I presume you're going to conclude that this was some sleazy crime or some affair connected with a woman. They must have given you orders from on high to hush up the affair as much as possible. So let me tell you—'

'Please sit down, Monsieur Delteil.'

He did not sit down at once.

'I hate talking to a man who's standing up.'

Maigret sounded tired and his voice was rather gruff. The overhead light was not switched on and the desk lamp gave only a greenish glow. Pierre Delteil eventually sat down on the chair indicated, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and opened his mouth to say something else of a disobliging nature but did not have time to begin.

‘Just as a simple formality,’ Maigret interposed, holding his hand out without looking at him directly, ‘would you show me your identity card?’

He examined it carefully, like the border police, turning it over and over in his fingers.

‘Film producer,’ he read out finally, under the heading ‘Occupation’.

‘And have you produced many films, Monsieur Delteil?’

‘Well, I—’

‘Perhaps you have produced one?’

‘It’s not in production yet, but—’

‘So if I understand you correctly, you haven’t produced anything at all yet. But you were dining at Maxim’s when I reached you by phone. And a little earlier you had been at Fouquet’s. You live in a furnished apartment in a rather expensive house in Rue de Ponthieu, and you own a very splendid car.’

He now looked at the other man from head to toe, as if to appreciate the cut of his suit, the silk shirt and the hand-made shoes.

‘Do you have a private income, Monsieur Delteil?’

‘I don’t see the point of—’

‘—these questions,’ Maigret finished the sentence calmly. ‘No point. What did you do before your brother was elected to the Assembly?’

‘I worked for his electoral campaign.’

‘And before that?’

‘I . . .’

‘I see. In short, for the last few years, you have been more or less running things for your brother behind the scenes. In exchange, he was taking care of your financial needs.’

‘Are you trying to humiliate me? Are those the instructions you’ve been given? Come clean! Your superiors know perfectly well this was a *political* crime, and they’ve ordered you to keep it under wraps at all costs. It’s because I understood that when I was upstairs that I waited for you. And let me tell you—’

‘You know who the killer was, do you?’

‘Not necessarily, but my brother was becoming a nuisance, and someone arranged to have him—’

‘You may smoke if you wish.’

There was a silence at that.

‘I suppose that, as far as you are concerned, a political crime is the only possibility?’

‘Do you know who killed him?’

‘Here, Monsieur Delteil, I’m the one who asks the questions. Did your brother have mistresses?’

‘Everyone knew that. He didn’t keep it a secret.’

‘Not even from his wife?’

‘No great need to keep it a secret, because they were in the process of divorcing. That’s one of the reasons Pat is in the States.’

‘Was she the one who asked for the divorce?’

Pierre Delteil hesitated.

‘On what grounds?’

‘Probably because it didn’t amuse her any more.’

‘You mean your brother didn’t?’

‘Do you know what American women are like?’

‘I’ve met a few in my time.’

‘Rich ones?’

‘Among others.’

‘Well, in that case, you’ll know that getting married is a kind of game with them. Pat came on a visit to Paris eight years ago. It was her first trip to Europe. She thought it fun to stay, have her own town-house in Paris, and lead the Parisian high life.’

‘And to have a husband who had a starring role in that Parisian life. Did she persuade your brother to go in for politics?’

‘He’d always intended to.’

‘So he simply took advantage of the means that his wealthy marriage put at his disposal. You’re telling me that fairly recently, his wife decided she’d had enough, and now she has returned to the United States to sue for divorce. What would have happened to your brother, then?’

‘He would have continued with his career.’

‘What about money? As a rule, American women take the precaution of making pre-nuptial arrangements.’

‘André wouldn’t have accepted her money. And I don’t see where these questions —’

‘Do you know this young man?’

Maigret held out the photo of Alain Lagrange. Pierre Delteil looked at it uncomprehendingly and raised his head.

‘Is this the killer?’

‘I’m asking you if you’ve ever seen him.’

‘No, never.’

‘Do you know a man called Lagrange, François Lagrange?’

Delteil searched his memory as if the name meant something to him and he was trying to place it.

‘I think in certain circles,’ Maigret added, ‘he is known as Baron Lagrange.’

‘Ah, now I know who you mean. Most of the time he’s just called the Baron.’

‘Do you know him well?’

‘I meet him from time to time in Fouquet’s, that kind of place. We’ve shaken hands. I may have had the odd drink with him.’

‘Have you had any business dealings with him?’

‘No, thank God!’

‘Your brother knew him?’

‘Same way I did, I expect. More or less everyone knows the Baron.’

‘So what do you know about him?’

‘Practically nothing. He’s an imbecile, a flabby fellow who tries to ingratiate himself with people.’

‘What’s his profession?’

And Delteil, more naively than he would have wished to look, asked:

‘He has a profession?’

‘I suppose he must have private means.’

Maigret almost added:

‘Not everyone is lucky enough to have a politician as his brother.’

But he did not, because it was no longer necessary. The younger Delteil was now cooperating fully, without being aware of his change in attitude.

‘He dabbles in various businesses. At least, I presume so. He’s not the only one. He’s the kind of man who takes you by the lapels and says he’s about to launch some venture worth hundreds of millions of francs, and then ends up asking you to lend him the money for his dinner, or for the taxi home.’

‘He tried to extract money from your brother?’

‘He tried to extract money from everyone.’

‘You don’t think your brother could have used him for something?’

‘Certainly not!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because my brother didn’t suffer fools gladly. I don’t see what you’re getting at. I think you’ve got information you don’t want to tell me. And I still don’t understand how anyone knew there was a trunk, sitting in left luggage at Gare du Nord, with André’s body inside it.’

‘We *didn’t* know.’

‘So it was just chance?’

Delteil started to laugh again.

‘Almost by chance. One more question. What reason could there be for a man like your brother to visit a man like the Baron?’

‘He visited him?’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘It doesn’t seem at all likely.’

‘At the start of an investigation, a crime never looks likely.’

And as there was a knock at the door, Maigret called out:

‘Come in!’

It was the waiter from the Brasserie Dauphine with beer and sandwiches.

‘Would you like some, Monsieur Delteil?’

‘No thank you. I was just having dinner when—’

‘I won’t keep you any longer. I have your telephone number. Tomorrow or later, I may need you again.’

‘So you’re ruling out the possibility of a political crime?’

‘I’m not ruling anything out. As you can see, I’m working on it.’

He picked up the phone to indicate more clearly that the interview was at an end.

‘Hello! Paul? That you?’

Delteil hesitated, but finally seized his hat and headed for the door.

‘Well, anyway, let me tell you that I won’t allow—’

Waving him away, Maigret said:

‘Goodnight, goodnight!’

The door closed.

‘Maigret here. Well? Yes, I thought so . . . And according to you he was killed some time on Tuesday evening, or perhaps during the night . . . Yes, that fits . . . more or less.’

It had been on Tuesday too, but in the afternoon, that François Lagrange had telephoned the doctor one last time, to check that Maigret would be at dinner next day. At that point, he still wanted to meet the inspector, and more than likely his motive was not mere

curiosity. So he had not been anticipating the politician's visit, but might he perhaps have been expecting it in the coming days!

On Wednesday morning, his son Alain had turned up at Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, looking so nervous and terrified, according to Madame Maigret, that she had felt sorry for him and taken him under her wing.

But what had brought the young man there? Did he want advice? Had he been present at the murder? Had he discovered the body, which might not yet have been inside the trunk?

What was clear was that the sight of Maigret's automatic had made him change his mind: he had taken the revolver and tiptoed out of the apartment, then hurried to the first gunsmith he could find to get cartridges.

So he must have had some intention in mind.

Then that same evening, his father had failed to turn up at the Pardons'. Instead, he had sought out a taxi-driver, and with his help had deposited the corpse at Gare du Nord, after which he had gone to bed and declared himself sick.

'What about the bullet, Paul?'

As he expected, it had not come from his American automatic, which would indeed have been impossible, since at the time of the crime, the weapon was still in his apartment, but from a small-calibre gun, a 6.35, which might have done no great harm, had it not been that the bullet went in through the left eye and lodged in the brain.

'Nothing else to report? Stomach?'

This had contained the remains of a copious dinner, and digestion was not very far advanced. According to Doctor Paul, that placed the crime at about eleven in the evening, since Delteil was not a man to dine early.

'Thanks, Paul. No, the matters I'll be dealing with next won't concern you.'

He started to eat the sandwiches, alone in his office, which was still lit only by the greenish glow from the lamp. He felt harassed, ill at ease. The beer tasted warm. He had not thought to order coffee and, wiping his lips, he went to fetch the bottle of cognac he kept in the cupboard and poured himself a glass.

'Hello. Special Infirmary, please.'

He was surprised to hear Journe's voice. The professor had turned out in person.

‘Have you had time to examine my customer? What do you think of him?’

A clear reply would have relieved him somewhat, but old Journe was not a man to provide clear answers. He launched into a long speech at the other end of the line, full of technical terms, the upshot of which was that it was 60 per cent likely that Lagrange was play-acting, but unless he slipped up, it might be a few weeks before they would be able to prove this scientifically.

‘Is Doctor Pardon still there?’

‘He’s about to leave.’

‘What’s Lagrange doing now?’

‘He’s quite meek and mild. He allowed himself to be put to bed, and started talking to the nurse in a childish voice. He burst into tears and told her people had threatened to hit him, that everyone was against him, and it had been like this all his life.’

‘Can I see him tomorrow?’

‘Yes, whenever you like.’

‘I’d just like a quick word with Pardon.’

And to the latter:

‘So, what do you think?’

‘Nothing new to report. I’m not entirely of the same mind as the professor, but he’s more competent than me, and it’s years since I practised psychiatry.’

‘But you have your own idea?’

‘I’d prefer to wait a few hours before talking about it. The case is too serious to give a snap judgement. Aren’t you going home to bed now?’

‘Not yet. I don’t think I’ll be getting any sleep tonight.’

‘You don’t need me any more?’

‘No, my friend. And thank you. Please give my apologies to your wife for keeping you up.’

‘She’s used to it.’

‘So’s mine, luckily.’

Maigret got to his feet with the idea of taking a stroll to Rue Popincourt to see how his men were getting on. Because of the burned papers in the fireplace, he doubted they would find any clues, but he wanted to have a poke round the apartment.

Just as he was picking up his hat, the telephone rang.

‘Hello? Detective Chief Inspector Maigret? This is the Faubourg Saint-Denis police station. I was told to ring on the off-chance this

might interest you. Officer Lecoeur speaking.'

He could tell the policeman was excited.

'It's about the young man whose photo we were sent. I've got here this fellow—'

He corrected himself:

'—this *person*, who was robbed of his wallet in Rue Maubeuge.'

The victim of the theft must have been standing nearby listening, so Lecoeur tried to choose his words carefully.

'He's a businessman up from the provinces, wait a minute . . . from Clermont-Ferrand. He was walking down Rue Maubeuge about half an hour ago when a man jumped out of the dark at him, brandishing a big automatic . . . more precisely a young man . . .'

Lecoeur spoke again to someone behind him.

'He says a *very* young man, almost a kid. He said his lips were trembling and he could hardly get the words out to say: "Give me your wallet, please."'

Maigret frowned. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a street thief would just say: 'Wallet!'

And simply by that difference, you could tell an amateur or a beginner from a professional.

'When this gentleman told me about the young man,' Lecoeur went on, not without a hint of pride, 'I thought at once about the photo we were sent yesterday and I showed it to him. He recognized him at once . . . What did you say? . . .'

It was the Clermont-Ferrand businessman, who was saying forcefully:

'I'm absolutely sure of that!'

'What did he do next?' Maigret asked.

'Who?'

'The attacker.'

Two voices came across again, sounding like a poorly tuned radio, two voices saying the same thing:

'He ran away.'

'Which way did he go?'

'Towards Boulevard de la Chapelle.'

'How much money was there in the wallet?'

'About thirty thousand francs. What should I do? Do you want to see him?'

'The victim? No. Take his statement. Just a moment! Put him on the line.'

The man started talking at once:

'My name is Grimal, Gaston Grimal, but look, I'd rather it—'

'No, of course not. I just wanted to ask you whether anything particular struck you about the attitude of the person who attacked you. Take your time to think.'

'I've been thinking for half an hour. All my papers—'

'You'll almost certainly get them back, in my opinion. So, this attacker . . . ?'

'He seemed like a young man of good background, not a ruffian.'

'Were you near a streetlamp?'

'Not far. About the same as from where I'm standing to the other office. He seemed as terrified as me, in fact. I almost—'

'Tried to resist?'

'Yes. Then I thought an accident could easily happen—'

'Nothing else? What sort of suit was he wearing?'

'Dark: navy blue, I think.'

'Shabby?'

'I don't know.'

'Thank you, Monsieur Grimal. I'd be very surprised if one of our patrols doesn't find your wallet on the pavement by the morning. Without the cash, of course.'

This was a detail Maigret had overlooked, and he kicked himself. Alain Lagrange had got hold of a revolver, but he must have had very little money in his pocket, judging by the general circumstances in the Rue Popincourt apartment.

He left his office abruptly, to go to the radio room, where there were just two men on duty.

'Put out a general call to stations and cars.'

Less than half an hour later, all the police stations in Paris received the message: '*Report to Detective Chief Inspector Maigret any armed robbery, or attempts at such in the last twenty-four hours. Urgent.*'

He repeated the message and gave a description of Alain Lagrange:

'*Probably still somewhere in the district around Gare du Nord and Boulevard de la Chapelle.*'

He did not go straight back to his office, but went to the hotel surveillance department.

'See if you haven't got an Alain Lagrange registered somewhere. Probably in a cheap hotel.'

That might be the case. Alain had not given his name to Madame Maigret, so there was a good chance he had checked in to sleep somewhere the previous night. Since no one knew his identity, he might well have written his real name on the card the authorities would collect from his hotel.

'Do you want to wait, sir?'

'No, let me know if anything turns up. I'll be upstairs.'

The crime-scene squad had returned from Rue Popincourt with their equipment, but his inspectors had stayed there. At half past midnight, Maigret received a phone call from the prefect of police.

'Any new developments?'

'No positive leads so far, sir.'

'What about the newspapers?'

'They'll only publish the press release. But once the first edition's on the streets, I expect the reporters will be round here in force.'

'So what do you think, Maigret?'

'Nothing for now. The Delteil brother badly wanted it to be classified as a political crime. I've tried gently to dissuade him.'

The chief of the Police Judiciaire also phoned, as did examining magistrate Rateau. Everyone was getting a bad night's sleep. As for Maigret, he did not intend to go to bed at all.

It was a quarter past one when he received a more surprising call. Not from the Gare du Nord neighbourhood, or even from the city centre, but from the police station in the western suburb of Neuilly.

Someone out there had told an officer coming in off patrol about Maigret's message, and the officer had scratched his head and said:

'Perhaps I'd better call this one in.'

He had told his story to the duty officer at the Police Judiciaire, who had advised him to speak directly to Maigret. He was a young policeman, and had only been in uniform for a few months.

'I don't know if this will really interest you,' he began, speaking too close to the receiver, so that his voice boomed. 'It was this morning, or perhaps I mean yesterday morning, since it's gone midnight now. I was on patrol on Boulevard Richard-Wallace, at the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, almost opposite the Bagatelle Gardens – tonight's my first evening on night duty, you see. There's a row of buildings, all looking the same. It was about ten a.m. I'd stopped to look at a big foreign car parked there, with unfamiliar number plates. And a young man came out of the house behind me, number 7a. I didn't really pay much attention, because he was walking quite

normally towards the end of the street. Then I saw the concierge come out of the building too, and she had this odd expression on her face.

'Well, I happen to know her slightly; we've exchanged a few words now and then, if I've been delivering a summons to someone in the building. So she recognized me.

'I said: "You're looking worried."

'What she said back was: "I just wonder what *he* was doing in this house."

'She was looking at the young man, who was just turning the corner.

'"'He came past my lodge without asking for anyone," she said. "He headed for the lift, first of all, then he hesitated, then he took the stairs. And as I'd never seen him before, I ran after him."

'"'Who did you want?' I asked him."

'"'He'd already gone up a few steps. He turned round, looking surprised and almost frightened, and he took a good moment before answering. And then all he could find to say was: 'I must have got the wrong house!'"'

And the policeman went on:

'The concierge claims he looked at her so strangely that she didn't dare argue. But when he came out, she followed him on to the street. I was intrigued by her story, so I went along to the corner of Rue de Longchamp myself, but there was no one in sight there any longer. The young man must have run off. And I've only just been shown the photo now, this evening. Although I'm not sure, I could almost swear it was him. But perhaps I was wrong to call you? The officer told me—'

'No, you did the right thing.'

And the young officer, who had his wits about him, added:

'My name is Lebraz, Émile Lebraz.'

Maigret called Lapointe.

'Tired?'

'No, chief.'

'Can you stay in my office and take all the calls? I hope to be back in three quarters of an hour. Anything urgent, ring me at number 7a, Boulevard Richard-Wallace. I'll be with the concierge, she'll have a telephone. In fact, it would save time if you were to phone her now, tell her I need to talk to her. That way, she'll have a bit of notice so she can get up and put on her dressing gown before

I get there.'

His drive through the deserted streets did not take long, and when he rang the bell, he found the lights on in the lodge, and the concierge not in her dressing gown but fully dressed, waiting for him. The building was an elegant one and the lodge was furnished like a parlour. In the neighbouring room, through the open door, a sleeping child could be seen.

'Monsieur Maigret!' whispered the woman, visibly excited to be visited by him in person.

'I'm so sorry to have woken you up. I just wanted you to examine these photographs and tell me whether the young man you startled yesterday morning on the stairs looks like any of them.'

He had taken the precaution of bringing a set of photos of young men of about the same age. The concierge did not hesitate, any more than the businessman from Clermont had, earlier on.

'That's him!' she exclaimed, pointing to Alain Lagrange.

'You're quite sure?'

'No doubt about it.'

'And when you caught up with him, he didn't threaten you in any way?'

'No. It's odd you should ask me that, because I thought he might. Just an impression, you understand. I wouldn't want to say something when I'm not sure. When he turned round, he didn't move, but I got this funny feeling in my chest. What I mean is, it seemed as if he was considering going for me—'

'How many tenants live here?'

'There are two apartments on each landing. Seven floors, so fourteen apartments. But two of them are empty at the moment. One family left for Brazil three weeks ago – well, they're Brazilian, he works at the embassy; and the gentleman on the fifth floor died twelve days ago.'

'Can you give me a list?'

'Yes, that's easy, I've got one here.'

Some water was coming to the boil on a gas cooker and, after handing the inspector a sheet of typed paper, the concierge set about making coffee.

'I thought you might like a cup. At this time of night . . . My late husband, who passed away last year, wasn't exactly in the police, he was in the republican guard.'

'I see two names for the ground floor, Delval and Trélo.'

She laughed.

'Ah yes, the Delvals. They're import-export people. They have offices over at Place des Victoires. But Monsieur Trélo lives alone. You don't know him? He's in films, he's a comic actor.'

'Anyway, it can't have been them the young man was after, if he was going first for the lift, then up the stairs.'

'First floor left, that's Monsieur Desquiens, there on the list, but he's away just now. He's on holiday with his children, who live in the south.'

'What does he do?'

'Nothing. He's rich. A widower, a nice, quiet, polite man.'

'And on the right? Rosetti.'

'Italians. She's very beautiful. They have three maids, plus a nanny for the baby who's just over a year old.'

'What do they do?'

'Monsieur Rosetti's in the motor trade. It was his car the policeman was staring at when I came out after the young man.'

'And on the second floor? I'm sorry to keep you standing all this time.'

'Not at all. Two sugars? Milk?'

'No milk. Thank you. Mettetal, who's that?'

'They're rich too, but they can't keep any of their domestic help because Madame Mettetal, who's in poor health, finds fault with everyone.'

Maigret scribbled notes in the margin of the list.

'And on the same floor, I see Beauman.'

'Diamond brokers. They're travelling. It's the season. I'm forwarding their mail to Switzerland.'

'Then third floor right, Jeanne Debul. A single woman?'

'A single woman, yes.' The concierge had pronounced these words in the tone women generally use to refer to another woman of whom they disapprove.

'What kind of woman?'

'Hard to call her *any* kind, exactly. She went off to England around midday. I was a bit surprised she hadn't mentioned it before.'

'Who would she have told?'

'Her maid, a good girl who tells me everything.'

'And the maid's there now?'

'Yes, she was down here in the lodge some of the evening. She

didn't want to go back up, because she's scared of sleeping on her own in the apartment.'

'And you said *she* was surprised?'

'The maid, yes. The night before that, Madame Debul came back in the small hours, as she often does. Note, I say Madame, but I don't believe she's ever been married.'

'How old is she?'

'Do you want to know her real age or the one she claims to be?'

'Both.'

'I know what the real one is, because I saw her papers when she took the apartment.'

'When was that?'

'About two years ago. Before that, she lived in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Well, she's forty-nine and she pretends she's forty. In the morning, she looks her age. But at night, well . . .'

'Does she have a lover?'

'Oh, don't get me wrong, she's not what you're thinking. She wouldn't be allowed to stay here if so. The agent's very strict about things like that. I don't know quite how to put it.'

'Try.'

'She's not from the same kind of background as the other tenants. On the other hand, she's not disreputable either, if you follow me. She's not a kept woman, for instance. She has money of her own. She gets letters from the bank and her stockbroker. She might be a widow or a divorcee who's living it up a bit.'

'She has visitors?'

'Not gigolos, if that's what you've got in mind. Her financial adviser comes sometimes. And women friends. And sometimes couples. But she's more the kind of woman who goes out, not one who has people round. Mornings, she stays in bed until midday. Afternoons, she might go into town, always very well dressed, quite tastefully, I must say . . . Then she comes home, gets dolled up in her evening gown, and I pull the latch for her when she gets back, oh, well after midnight. It's an odd thing too, what Georgette says – that's her maid. She spends a lot of money. Her furs alone must cost a fortune, and she's always wearing a diamond ring, this big. But at the same time, Georgette says, she's close with her cash, and spends a lot of time going over her household accounts.'

'When did she leave?'

'About eleven thirty. That's what surprised Georgette. Because at

that time of day, Madame would normally be in bed. She was asleep when she got a phone call. And right away, she asked for the railway timetable.'

'And that was quite soon after the young man had tried to enter the building?'

'A little later, yes. She didn't wait for breakfast, she just started packing.'

'A lot of luggage?'

'No, just some suitcases. No trunk. She's travelled around a lot.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because of the labels on her cases, big hotels in Deauville, Nice, Naples, Rome, foreign places.'

'And she didn't say when she'd be back?'

'She didn't tell me. Georgette doesn't know either.'

'She didn't ask to have her mail forwarded?'

'No, she just telephoned Gare du Nord to book a seat on the express to Calais.'

Maigret was struck by the way the words 'Gare du Nord' kept turning up in this investigation. It was in Gare du Nord's left luggage that François Lagrange had deposited the trunk containing the politician's body. And it was in that neighbourhood that his son had robbed the businessman from Clermont-Ferrand.

And the same Alain had tried to sneak up the stairs of a building on Boulevard Richard-Wallace, shortly after which one of the tenants had left for Gare du Nord. Was it merely coincidence?

'You know, if you want to ask Georgette any questions, she'll be only too pleased. She's so afraid of being alone at night that she'd love to have some company . . .'

And the concierge added:

'. . . especially your company!'

But Maigret's priority was to finish going through the list of tenants and he patiently pointed to them, one after the other. On the fourth floor, there was a film producer, a genuine one this time, whose name could be seen on posters all over Paris. Above him, lived a director who was also well known and, as if by chance, a screenwriter lived on the seventh floor and did his fitness exercises on the balcony every morning.

'Should I go and tell Georgette?'

'I need to make a phone call first.'

He called Gare du Nord.

‘Maigret here, from the Police Judiciaire. Tell me, is there a train that leaves for Calais around midnight?’

It was at about eleven thirty that the businessman had been threatened in Rue Maubeuge.

‘The 00.13, yes.’

‘The express?’

‘It connects with the Dover ferry at 5.30 a.m. It’s non-stop to Calais.’

‘Do you remember whether a ticket for that train was sold to a young man travelling alone?’

‘The clerks who were at the ticket office then have all gone home to bed.’

‘Thank you.’

He called the harbour police at Calais and gave them Alain Lagrange’s description.

‘He’s armed,’ he added, just in case.

Then, after finishing his cup of coffee, he announced, without too much hope:

‘I’ll go up and see Georgette, then.’

To which the concierge replied with a knowing smile:

‘Watch out! She’s a pretty girl!’

And she added:

‘Who likes good-looking gentlemen!’

5.

In which the little housemaid is pleased with herself, but Maigret, by six in the morning, is less so

She was rosy-complexioned, with full breasts, and was wearing candy-pink crepe pyjamas which had been washed so often that her outlines could be seen through the transparent fabric. Her body, with bouncing curves in every direction, had an unfinished look: too fresh-faced for Paris, she made you think of a duckling that had not yet lost its fluffy down. When she opened the door, he caught a whiff of bed and armpits.

He had let the concierge telephone ahead to wake her and let her know that he was on his way up. It must have been difficult to get through at once, since when he had arrived on the third floor the telephone was still ringing inside the apartment.

He had waited. The phone was too far from the landing for him to hear the maid's voice. Then came footsteps on the carpeted floor and she opened the door, showing no embarrassment, and without having troubled to put on a dressing gown. Perhaps she didn't own one? When she got up in the morning, it was to start work, and when she undressed at night, it was to go to sleep. Her blonde hair was tousled and there were traces of lipstick on her lips.

'You can sit down in here.'

They had gone through the entrance hall and she had lit just the tall standard lamp in the drawing room. For herself she had chosen a large pale-green sofa, on which she was half-reclining. The breeze coming through the tall French windows ruffled the curtains. She stared at Maigret with the solemn expression of a child looking at an adult about whom they have heard a great deal.

'I didn't imagine you like this,' she said eventually.

‘How did you imagine me?’

‘I don’t know. But you’re better-looking.’

‘The concierge said you wouldn’t mind my coming up to ask you a few questions.’

‘About Madame?’

‘That’s right.’

It didn’t surprise her. Nothing seemed to surprise her.

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-two, and I’ve been in Paris six years. You can go ahead.’

He began by showing her the photograph of Alain Lagrange.

‘Do you know this man?’

‘No, never seen him.’

‘You’re sure? He’s never visited your employer?’

‘Not since I’ve been with her, anyway. Young men aren’t her type, whatever people might think.’

‘And why would they think that?’

‘Because of her age.’

‘Have you worked for her long?’

‘Since she came here. Nearly two years.’

‘So you didn’t work for her when she lived in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette?’

‘No, I started work the day she moved in.’

‘And she still had her previous maid?’

‘I never met her. Seemed like Madame wanted to begin again from scratch. Furniture, ornaments, all brand new.’

This seemed to have a meaning for her, and Maigret thought he could guess what was behind it.

‘You don’t like her?’

‘She’s not the kind of woman you can *like*. Anyway she doesn’t care.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She just lives for herself. She doesn’t bother to be nice. When she’s talking, it’s not for you, it’s because she wants to talk.’

‘And you don’t know who telephoned when she suddenly decided to leave for London?’

‘No. She picked up herself. She didn’t say any name.’

‘Did she sound surprised, annoyed?’

‘If you knew her, you’d know she never gives away what she’s feeling.’

‘And you don’t know anything about her past?’

‘Just that she lived in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, that when she talks to me, she’s very familiar. And that she’s fussy about the accounts.’

To hear her speak, this explained everything and, once again, he had the feeling he understood what she meant.

‘So you don’t think she’s a real lady?’

‘No, definitely not. I worked for a real society lady once, I can tell the difference. And I worked once in the Place Saint-Georges neighbourhood, for a kept woman.’

‘And Jeanne Debul used to be a kept woman?’

‘If she was once, she isn’t any more. She’s rich, that’s for sure.’

‘Did any men come to visit her?’

‘Her masseur, every other day. She’s very familiar with him too. She calls him by his first name, Ernest.’

‘Nothing between them?’

‘That doesn’t interest her.’

Georgette’s pyjama top was very short and the kind that goes on over the head; since she was lounging back among the cushions, a band of pink flesh appeared above her waist.

‘Mind if I smoke?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I don’t have any cigarettes.’

‘There are some over on the table.’

She found it quite natural that he should stand up and offer her the packet of Egyptian cigarettes belonging to Jeanne Debul. While he struck a match, she held the cigarette awkwardly and puffed out smoke like a beginner.

She was pleased with herself, pleased to have been woken up by as important a man as Maigret, and to have him listen attentively to what she had to say.

‘She has plenty of friends, men and women, but they don’t often come here. She rings them up; she usually calls them by their first names. She sees them in the evenings, at cocktail parties or in restaurants and nightclubs. I’ve often wondered whether she mightn’t have run a house in the past. Know what I mean?’

‘And the people who come here?’

‘Her financial adviser’s the main one. She has him come into her office. He’s a lawyer, Maître Gibon, he doesn’t live round here, he’s in the ninth arrondissement. So she must know him from before, when she lived over there. And then there’s another man, a bit younger, who works for a bank, and she talks to him about her

savings. He's the one she telephones if she wants to buy anything on the stock exchange.'

'Have you ever seen a man called François Lagrange?'

'The bad penny!'

She corrected herself with a laugh.

'It's not me that calls him that. *She* does. When I announce him, she mutters:

'"Oh, the bad old penny, turning up again!"

'That tells you something, don't you think? He always says when he arrives:

'"Ask Madame Debul if she is willing to receive Baron Lagrange."'

'And she does?' asked Maigret.

'Almost always.'

'And is that often?'

'Maybe once a week. Some weeks he doesn't come, and others he comes twice. Last week he came round here twice on the same day.'

'What time?'

'Always in the morning, about eleven. Apart from Ernest, her masseur, he's the only one she receives in her bedroom.'

And as Maigret registered this:

'It's not what you think. Even for the lawyer, she gets dressed. She dresses very well, mind you, very discreetly. That's what struck me about her right away: the way she is when she's in bed, and the way she is when she's up and dressed. It's like two different people. She doesn't talk the same way, her voice is kind of different.'

'She talks in a more vulgar way when she's in bed?'

'Yes. Not just vulgar. I don't know how to put it.'

'Is François Lagrange the only person she talks to like that?'

'Yes. She'll call out to him, whatever she happens to be wearing:

'"Come on in, you!"

'As if they were old friends.'

'Or old accomplices?'

'If you say so. Until I leave the room, they don't talk about anything important. He's timid; he sits right on the edge of one of her fancy armchairs, as if he's afraid of creasing the satin.'

'Does he bring any papers with him, a briefcase?'

'No. He looks distinguished. Not my type, but he has presence, I'd say.'

'And you've never overheard their conversation?'

'That's impossible with her, she guesses everything. She's got

sharp ears, all right. She's the one who listens outside doors in this house. If I use the phone, I can be sure she's somewhere spying on me. If I take a letter out to post, she'll say, "*Now* who are you writing to?" And I know she looks at the address. See the kind of person she is?'

'Yes, I see.'

'There's something else you haven't seen and this'll really give you a surprise.'

She sprang to her feet and tossed the cigarette end into the ashtray.

'Come with me. You've seen the drawing room. It's furnished the same way all the drawing rooms are in this building. One of the best decorators in Paris did the work. This is the dining room, modern style too. Wait while I put the light on.'

She pushed open another door and switched on the light, then stood aside so that he could see the bedroom, entirely furnished in white satin.

'And these are her evening clothes.'

In an adjoining dressing room, she opened a cupboard and fondled the silky material of the dresses hanging there in perfect order.

'So. Now, come with me.'

She went ahead of him down a corridor and the crepe pyjamas had managed to get themselves wedged in the cleft between her buttocks. She opened another door and switched on another light.

'There!'

This was a small office at the back of the apartment, an office that could have belonged to an accountant. No trace of a woman's presence. A metal filing cabinet, painted olive green, and behind the swivel chair, a huge safe of a fairly recent model.

'This is where she spends part of her afternoons, and this is where she has the lawyer and the banker come. Look . . .'

And she pointed out to him a pile of newspapers: *Stock Exchange Journal*. Maigret did also notice alongside it a racing gazette.

'She wears glasses?'

'Just in this room.'

A pair of large round horn-rimmed spectacles was sitting on a blotter with leather corners.

He automatically tried the filing cabinet, but it was locked.

'Every night, when she comes in, she shuts her jewels up in the

safe.'

'What else is in there? Have you ever seen inside it?'

'Deeds and things. Papers mostly. And a little red notebook that she often looks things up in.'

From the desk, Maigret picked up a telephone pad, the kind on which people note down frequently called numbers, and started to leaf through the pages. He read out the names under his breath.

Georgette explained:

'Milkman . . . butcher . . . ironmonger on the Avenue de Neuilly . . . Madame's shoemaker . . .'

When instead of a surname he read out a first name, she would smile in satisfaction:

'Olga . . . Nadine . . . Marcelle . . .'

'What did I tell you?'

There were some men's first names too, but not as many. Then there were some that the maid did not recognize. Under 'Banks', there were no fewer than five establishments listed, including an American bank in Place Vendôme.

He looked for Delteil's name, but it wasn't there, although an André and a Pierre figured somewhere in the list. Could they be the politician and his brother?

'When you'd seen the rest of this apartment, did you expect to find *this*?'

To please her, he said no.

'Aren't you thirsty? Would you like a drink?'

'The concierge kindly made some coffee for me.'

'You don't want a drop of something stronger?'

She led him back to the drawing room, switching off lights as they went, and as if their conversation was going to last longer, took up her position on the sofa, since he had refused the offer of a drink.

'Does your employer drink alcohol?'

'Like a man.'

'You mean she drinks a lot?'

'I've never seen her drunk, except once or twice when she got in very late. But she pours herself a whisky after her morning coffee, and has another three or four in the afternoon. That's why I said she drinks like a man. She takes her whisky almost neat.'

'And she didn't tell you which London hotel she was going to stay in?'

‘No.’

‘Or how long she meant to stay?’

‘She didn’t tell me anything! She took just half an hour to pack her bags and get dressed.’

‘What was she wearing when she left?’

‘Her grey two-piece suit.’

‘Did she take any evening dresses?’

‘Two.’

‘I don’t think I have any more questions for you, so I’ll let you get back to bed.’

‘Already? Are you in a hurry?’

She deliberately allowed a little more flesh to appear between the pyjama top and trousers, and provocatively crossed her legs in a certain way.

‘Do you often follow up cases at night?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘You really don’t want a drink?’

She sighed.

‘Now I’m awake, I won’t be able to get back to sleep. What’s the time?’

‘Nearly three o’clock.’

‘At four it’ll be getting light and the birds will start singing.’

He stood up, feeling awkward at having to disappoint her, and perhaps she was still hoping that he didn’t want to leave, that he intended to approach her. It was only when she saw him heading for the door that she got up from the sofa.

‘Will you be coming back?’

‘Possibly.’

‘It’ll never be a nuisance. Just ring the bell with two shorts and a long. I’ll know it’s you and I’ll open the door. When I’m here on my own, I don’t always answer the door.’

‘Thank you, mademoiselle.’

That smell of bed and underarm sweat reached him once more. One of her large breasts brushed against his sleeve with a certain insistence.

‘Good luck,’ she whispered, as he reached the stairs.

And she leaned over the banister to watch him go down.

At the Police Judiciaire, Janvier was waiting for him, having spent several hours in Rue Popincourt. He looked exhausted.

‘How was it, chief? Has he said anything yet?’

Maigret shook his head.

'I left Houard back there, just in case. We turned the place upside down, but we didn't find anything much. I just thought I'd show you this.'

Maigret first poured himself a glass of cognac, and passed the bottle to the inspector.

'You'll see, it's a bit odd.'

Collected in a cardboard folder, apparently the former cover of a school exercise book, was a pile of press cuttings, some with photographs. Maigret, frowning, read the headlines, and glanced through the articles, while Janvier watched him with a quizzical air.

All the articles without exception concerned himself, and some dated back seven years. Reports of cases, from day to day, sometimes containing a copy of the trial.

'Do you notice anything, chief? While I was waiting for you, I read right through them.'

Maigret did notice something, on which he was reluctant to comment.

'It looks a lot as if someone has picked out cases where you seemed to be sort of on the side of the accused, doesn't it?'

One of the articles was even headed: '*Chief Inspector Maigret has a kind heart.*'

Another was devoted to evidence given by Maigret as witness in a High Court trial, in which all his replies had shown his sympathy for the young man in the dock.

Even clearer was another article, published in a weekly magazine a year earlier, which concerned not one particular case but the question of crime in general, and was entitled: 'Maigret's Humanity'.

'What do you think of all this? The whole folder proves this fellow has been stalking you for a long time; he's interested in all your sayings and doings, and in your character.'

Some words were underlined in blue pencil, among others the words *indulgence* and *understanding*.

And finally, one whole passage was outlined, in which a journalist reported the last morning of a criminal sentenced to death, revealing that after having refused a priest, the condemned man had asked as a favour a final conversation with Chief Inspector Maigret.

‘You’re not amused?’

And indeed, Maigret was looking more solemn, more weighed down, as if this discovery had opened up new perspectives.

‘You didn’t find anything else?’

‘Just bills. Unpaid, of course. The Baron owes money right and left. His coal merchant hasn’t been paid for this past winter. Here’s a photo of his wife with their first child.’

It was a poor print. The dress and hairstyle were no longer fashionable. The young woman posing for the photograph had a melancholy smile. Perhaps that was the ‘look’ of the period, in order to seem distinguished. But Maigret could have sworn that, just from seeing the photograph, anyone would realize this woman was not destined to have a happy life.

‘In a wardrobe I found one of her dresses, pale-blue satin, and a cardboard box stuffed full of baby clothes.’

Janvier had three children, the youngest not yet a year old.

‘My wife only keeps their first pair of shoes.’

Maigret picked up the telephone.

‘Special Infirmary,’ he requested in a low voice. ‘Hello. Who’s that speaking?’

It was the head nurse, a red-haired woman whom he knew.

‘Maigret here. How is Lagrange? . . . What did you say? I can hardly hear you.’

She told him that the patient, who had been given an injection, had gone to sleep almost immediately after the professor had left. Half an hour later, she had heard a slight noise and had tiptoed in to see him.

‘He was crying.’

‘He didn’t say anything to you?’

‘He heard me come in, and I put the light on. There were still tears running down his cheeks. He looked at me without saying anything for a moment or two, and I had the feeling he was going to tell me something in confidence.’

‘Did he seem to be in his right mind?’

She hesitated.

‘It’s not for me to say,’ she replied, beating a retreat.

‘And after that?’

‘He reached out as if he wanted to hold my hand.’

‘And did he?’

‘No, he began to groan and repeated the same thing over and

over:

‘“You won’t let them hit me, will you? Please don’t let them hit me.”’

‘And that’s all?’

‘In the end he started to get agitated. I thought he was going to jump out of bed. He was shouting:

‘“I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! They can’t let me die . . .”’

Maigret hung up and turned to Janvier, who was fighting off sleep.

‘You can go home to bed.’

‘What about you?’

‘I have to wait till five thirty. I need to know whether that boy took the Calais train.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘To follow someone to England.’

On the Wednesday morning, Alain had stolen a revolver and obtained ammunition. On Thursday, he had turned up at Boulevard Richard-Wallace, and half an hour later Jeanne Debul, who knew his father, had received a phone call and had left in a hurry for Gare du Nord.

What had the young man done that afternoon? Why hadn’t he left at once? One might reasonably suppose it was for lack of money.

To get hold of some cash by the only method open to him he needed to wait for darkness to fall.

As if by chance, he had attacked the businessman from Clermont-Ferrand in a street near Gare du Nord, shortly before a train left for Calais.

‘By the way, I forgot to tell you, they telephoned about the wallet. It was found in the street.’

‘Which street?’

‘Rue de Dunkerque.’

Still near the station!

‘Without the cash, naturally.’

‘Before you go, can you put a call through to the passport office? Ask them if they have ever issued a passport in the name of Alain Lagrange.’

While he waited, he went over to stand by the window. It was not yet light, just that cold grey hour before sunrise. In a kind of dusty penumbra, the Seine was flowing darkly, and a boatman was

washing down the deck of his vessel moored to the embankment. A tug was sliding downstream silently, going somewhere to collect a string of barges.

'He applied for a passport eleven months ago, chief. He wanted to go to Austria.'

'So his passport's still valid. You don't need a visa for England. You didn't find one when you looked through his things?'

'No, nothing.'

'Spare clothes?'

'He's probably only got one presentable suit, and he's wearing that. There's another in his wardrobe, but it's threadbare. And all the socks we found were in holes.'

'Get off to bed now.'

'Sure you don't need me any more?'

'Quite sure. Anyway, there are two inspectors in the office.'

Maigret did not realize that he was dropping off to sleep himself in his armchair. When he suddenly opened his eyes, because the tug-boat was now coming back upstream, and hooting before going under the bridge with its seven barges, the dawn sky was pink and rays of sunlight were touching the rooftops. He looked at his watch and picked up the telephone.

'Get me the harbour police in Calais.'

It took a while. The harbour police weren't answering. The inspector who finally came to the phone was out of breath.

'This is Maigret from the Police Judiciaire in Paris.'

'Yes, I know what it's about.'

'And?'

'We've just finished checking the passports. The ferry's still in harbour. My colleagues are still there.'

Maigret could hear the ship's sirens sounding as if it was about to leave.

'And young Lagrange?'

'Didn't find him. Nobody matching his description. There were only a handful of passengers. It was easy to check.'

'Have you still got the list of people who went over yesterday?'

'I'll go and get it. It's in the next office, if you can hang on.'

When he came back it was to announce:

'I can't see any Lagrange in the people leaving yesterday either.'

'I'm not talking about Lagrange now. Have you got someone called Jeanne Debul?'

‘Debul? Debul . . . D . . . D . . . Let’s see. Daumas, Dazergues, Debul, Jeanne Louise Clémentine, age 49, resident in Neuilly-sur-Seine, 7a, Boulevard—’

‘Yes, I know. What address did she give as her destination?’

‘London, the Savoy Hotel.’

‘Thank you. And you’re sure that Lagrange—’

‘Yes, you can be quite sure of that, sir.’

Maigret felt overheated, perhaps because he had not slept. He was in a bad mood, and as if in revenge he reached out for the cognac bottle. Then he suddenly grabbed the phone again, and snapped:

‘Get me Le Bourget!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I’m asking you to put me through to Le Bourget airport!’

He sounded irritable. The switchboard operator hurried, pulling a face.

‘This is Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, at the Police Judiciaire.’

‘Inspector Mathieu speaking.’

‘Are there any night flights to London?’

‘There’s one at 10 p.m. another after midnight at 00.45, and the first morning plane went off a few minutes ago. I can still hear it making its ascent.’

‘Can you get hold of the passenger list?’

‘Which one?’

‘The midnight one, the 00.45.’

‘Just a moment.’

It was unusual for Maigret to be so brusque.

‘Got it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Look for a Lagrange.’

‘Yes, here we are . . . Lagrange, Alain François Marie—’

‘Thank you!’

‘That’s all?’

But Maigret had already hung up. Because of the wretched Gare du Nord, on which he had been fixated, he hadn’t thought of air travel, so by now Alain Lagrange, with his loaded automatic, had been in London for a while.

His hand hovered over the desk, before picking up the receiver again.

‘The Savoy Hotel, London.’

He was put through almost at once.

‘This is the Savoy Hotel. Reception desk.’

He was tired of repeating his request, giving his name and title.

‘Can you tell me if a certain Jeanne Debul checked in to your hotel last night?’

It took less time than with the police. The reception clerk had an up-to-date list of all the guests to hand.

‘Yes, sir. Room 605. Do you wish to speak to her?’

He hesitated.

‘No. But can you check whether you also have an Alain Lagrange staying?’

It took hardly any longer.

‘No one of that name, sir.’

‘I presume you ask people for their passports when they arrive?’

‘Yes, of course, we follow the regulations.’

‘So Alain Lagrange couldn’t have checked in under a false identity?’

‘Not unless he’s got a false passport. The police come and examine them every night, of course.’

‘Thank you.’

He had one more call to make, one he particularly dreaded, since he would have to rely on his halting schoolboy English.

‘Get me Scotland Yard.’

It would have been a miracle if his friend Inspector Pyke, whom he had welcomed to France in the past, was at his desk at this hour. He had to make do with an anonymous official, who took a long time to understand who he was, and who spoke in a nasal voice.

‘A Frenchwoman, Jeanne Debul, age 49, is staying at the Savoy Hotel, room 605 . . . I would be obliged if for the next few hours you could keep a discreet watch on her.’

His distant colleague had the infuriating habit of repeating Maigret’s last words, but with the right accent, as if correcting him.

‘It’s possible that a young man may try to see her or to waylay her. I’ll give you his description.’

Once he had done so, he added:

‘He’s armed. With a Smith & Wesson special. Which means you can arrest him. I’ll wire you his photograph in a few minutes.’

But the Englishman was not ready to accept this, and Maigret had to give more details and repeat the same thing three or four times.

‘What is it exactly you want us to do?’

Faced with such obstinacy, Maigret regretted having taken the precaution of phoning the Yard, and felt like saying: ‘Nothing at all!’

He was damp with sweat.

‘I’ll be over there myself as soon as possible,’ he said finally.

‘You mean you’re coming to Scotland Yard?’

‘I’m coming to London, yes.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know exactly, I don’t have the times of the flights in front of me.’

‘You’re taking the plane?’

He hung up in exasperation, cursing this civil servant whom he didn’t know, and who was no doubt a conscientious fellow. What would Lucas have replied to an inspector from Scotland Yard telephoning at six in the morning with the same kind of story, conveyed in poor French?

‘Me again. Get me Le Bourget again, please.’

There was a flight at 8.15. That gave him time to go back to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, change, shave, and even to grab a bite of breakfast. Madame Maigret was careful not to question him.

‘I don’t know when I’ll be back,’ he muttered grumpily, vaguely intending to irritate her, so as to pass on his anxiety to someone else. ‘I’m going to London.’

‘Ah.’

‘Can you get my small suitcase packed with a change of clothes and my shaving things? There should be a few English pounds still in the drawer.’

The telephone rang. He was just tying his tie.

‘Maigret? Rateau here.’

It was the examining magistrate, of course, who had spent the night in his comfortable bed, who was no doubt delighted to be woken by bright sunlight and who, as he tucked into his croissants, was asking for the latest news.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said I don’t have time to talk now, I’m getting a plane to London in thirty-five minutes.’

‘To London?’

‘Yes.’

‘But what is it that you’ve found to—?’

‘Excuse me, I have to go, the plane won’t wait.’

And he was in such a state that he added:

‘I’ll send you a postcard!’

Upon which, needless to say, the phone was slammed down at the other end.

6.

In which Maigret goes so far as to wear a carnation in his buttonhole, but has very little success

They ran into cloud cover as they approached the French coast and flew up above it. Through a break in the clouds a little later, Maigret caught a lucky glimpse of the sea, sparkling as if covered in silvery scales, and of fishing boats trailing a wake of foam.

His neighbour leaned across amicably to point out the white cliffs, explaining:

'That's Dover . . . Douvres.'

He thanked the man with a smile, and soon there was only a thin haze between the aeroplane and the earth beneath. Occasionally, they came to a large luminous cloud and emerged from it to see green fields down below, dotted with miniature cows.

Finally, the horizon tilted and Croydon airport came into view. And so, once they had landed, did Mr Pyke. Because Mr Pyke was waiting to greet his French colleague. Not on the airfield itself, as he would no doubt have been entitled to do, and not standing apart from the crowd either, but with all the other people behind the barriers separating passengers from their waiting friends and relations.

He did not make conspicuous signs, or wave a handkerchief. When Maigret looked in his direction, he simply gave a little nod of the head, as he probably did every morning to greet colleagues at the office.

They had not seen each other for some time, and it was twelve or thirteen years since Maigret had set foot in England.

He followed the queue, suitcase in hand, entered the building for customs and immigration, and Mr Pyke was still there, behind a

glass partition, wearing his dark-grey, rather too tight-fitting suit and his black trilby, and sporting a carnation in his buttonhole.

The Englishman could easily have entered the building and told the passport control officer: 'This is a VIP, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, who is visiting us . . .'

That was what Maigret would have done for him at Le Bourget. But he took no offence, understanding that it was, on the contrary, an example of his colleague's tact. Now he felt a little ashamed at his own irritation that morning towards the official at the Yard. Because if Pyke was here, it meant that the man he had spoken to had not done his job badly, indeed he had shown initiative. It was only half past ten. To reach Croydon in time, Pyke must have left London almost as soon as he walked into his office.

Maigret emerged through the doors. A dry, horny hand was thrust towards him.

'*Comment allez-vous?*'

And Pyke continued, still in French – a sacrifice for him, since he spoke it with difficulty and was ashamed of making mistakes.

'I hope you – er – enjoy? How do you say that? Yes, enjoy this beautiful day.'

In fact, it was the first time Maigret had visited England in summer and he wondered whether he had ever seen London bathed in sunlight.

'I thought you might prefer to travel by car, rather than in the airport bus.'

He did not broach the subject of the investigation, or even refer to it, and that too was an indication of his personal kind of tact. They took their seats in a Bentley belonging to the Yard, driven by a uniformed chauffeur who observed the highway code scrupulously, and did not once jump a red light.

'Pretty, don't you think?'

And Pyke pointed to the rows of little pink-brick houses which might have looked sad on a grey day, but made a charming picture in the sunshine, each with a square of lawn, hardly larger than a double bedsheet, between gate and front door. You could sense that he loved the sight of the London suburbs, in one of which he lived himself.

The pink-brick houses were succeeded by yellow-brick ones, then brown, then pink again. It was getting warmer, and in some of the little gardens automatic hoses had been turned on.

‘I almost forgot to give you this.’

And he handed Maigret a sheet of paper on which was written in French:

Alain Lagrange, 19 years old, office clerk, checked in at 4 a.m. at the Gilmore Hotel, opposite Victoria Station, without luggage.

Slept until eight, then went out.

Walked into the Astoria Hotel, and inquired after a Madame Jeanne Debul.

Then he went to the Continental, and Claridge’s, asking the same question.

Seems to be approaching hotels in alphabetical order.

Has never been to London before. Speaks no English.

Maigret acknowledged this with a brief nod of thanks and more than ever regretted his hostility to the official earlier that morning.

After a long silence and several more streets of similar houses, Pyke spoke:

‘I took the liberty of booking you into the hotel, because there are a lot of tourists in town at the moment.’

He passed his companion a card with the name Savoy Hotel and the number of the suite. Maigret almost failed to notice it: his room number was 604.

So they had lodged him directly opposite Jeanne Debul.

‘Is that person still there?’ he asked.

‘She was when we left Croydon. I got a phone call as your plane was on approach.’

Nothing else. Pyke was looking pleased, not so much because he could prove to Maigret that the British police force was efficient, as because he could show off England to him on an indisputably fine summer’s day.

As they reached central London, with its red double-decker buses, and its pavements thronged with women in summer dresses, he could not stop himself murmuring:

‘Fine sight, eh?’

And as they approached the Savoy:

‘If you’re not too busy, I could come and pick you up for lunch at about one. I’ll be in the office until then, and you can always phone me.’

And that was all. He let Maigret go into the hotel on his own, while the chauffeur handed his suitcase to one of the porters.

Did the clerk at reception recognize him after twelve years? Did he know him only from photographs? Or was it simple professional courtesy? Or the fact that his room had been booked by Scotland Yard? Without waiting for him to speak, the clerk handed him a key:

'Did you have a good journey, Monsieur Maigret?'

'Very good, thank you.'

The large front hall where, at any hour of day or night, there would be people relaxing in spacious armchairs, always impressed him a little. On the right was a flower stall. Every other man in the hall had one in his buttonhole, and no doubt because of Pyke's happy mood, Maigret bought himself a red carnation.

He remembered that the bar was on the left. Feeling thirsty, he moved towards the glass door and tried to open it: in vain.

'Not before half past eleven, sir!'

He scowled. It was always like that when he travelled abroad. Some details that enchanted him, then others that irritated him. Why the devil had he no right to drink a glass of something before half past eleven? He had not slept all night, he felt a rush of blood to the head, and the sunshine was making him slightly dizzy. Perhaps it was also an effect of the motion of the aeroplane.

As he made for the lift, an unfamiliar man approached him.

'The lady has just had her breakfast sent up. Mr Pyke told me to keep you informed. Should I stay on watch for you, sir?'

It was an officer from the Yard. Maigret thought he looked elegant, not at all out of place in this luxury hotel, and he too was wearing a flower in his buttonhole, a white one in his case.

'The young man hasn't shown up?'

'Not yet, sir.'

'Can you keep an eye on the hall and let me know the minute he arrives?'

'It'll be a while before he gets to the letter S, sir. I think Inspector Pyke has one of my colleagues on duty at the Lancaster.'

His bedroom was huge, leading off a pearl-grey sitting room, and the windows looked out on to the Thames, where he could see a pleasure boat going past, just like the ones in Paris, its two decks crammed with tourists.

Maigret felt so hot that he decided to shower and change. He was on the point of telephoning Paris to have news of the Baron but changed his mind, got dressed and opened the outer door. Number

605 was directly opposite. Light showed under the door, indicating that the curtains were open. He was about to knock when he heard the sound of bathwater running, so he began to pace the corridor, smoking his pipe. A chambermaid who was passing gave him a curious look. She must have mentioned him to someone in authority, since a valet in tails came to look at him in turn. Then, seeing by his watch that it was 11.24, Maigret took the lift and was at the door to the bar the minute it opened. Other gentlemen who had been waiting in their armchairs for this moment were also hurrying inside.

'Scotch, sir?'

'Yes, that'll do.'

'Soda?'

His expression must have shown that he found his drink lacking in flavour as the barman offered:

'A double, sir?'

That felt much better already. He had never imagined that it could be as warm as this in London. He went outside for a breath of air in front of the large revolving door, glanced once more at the time, and went back to the lift.

When he knocked at the door of 605, a woman's voice said:

'*Entrez!*'

Then, no doubt imagining that it was room service, she called more loudly in English:

'*Come in!*'

He turned the handle and the door opened. He found himself in a room filled with dazzling sunlight, where a woman in a peignoir was sitting at her dressing table. She did not look at him at once, but went on brushing her dark hair, holding some hairpins between her teeth. It was in the mirror that she first caught sight of him. She frowned.

'What do *you* want?'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, from the Police Judiciaire.'

'Does that give you the right to walk into people's rooms?'

'You said to come in.'

It was hard to guess her age. She must have been very beautiful once, as was still evident. At night, under artificial light, she could probably still pass for younger, especially if the hard lines round her mouth which now appeared were to soften.

'You can take that pipe out of your mouth, for a start.'

He did so, awkwardly. He hadn't thought about his pipe.

'Now, if you have anything to say to me, it had better be quick. I can't see what business the French police would have with me. Especially here, in London.'

She was still not facing him, which made their exchange difficult. She must have known this and carried on doing her hair at the dressing table, watching him in the mirror. Standing there, he was aware of feeling too big and bulky. The bed had not been made. There was a tray with the remains of breakfast and the only seat he could see was a fragile Louis XV-style armchair which would not easily accommodate his large thighs.

So, looking at her similarly, by way of the mirror, he simply said:

'Alain is in London.'

Either she had remarkable self-control, or the name meant nothing to her, for she showed no reaction.

He continued in the same vein:

'He is carrying a gun.'

'And have you crossed the Channel to tell me that? Because I suppose you've come from Paris. What name did you say? Your own, I mean.'

He was sure she was play-acting, hoping to annoy him.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

'From which district?'

'From the Police Judiciaire.'

'And you're looking for a young man called Alain? He's not here. You can search my rooms if you want to be sure.'

'He's the one who's looking for *you*.'

'Why?'

'That's just what I would like to ask you.'

This time she stood up, and he saw that she was almost his own height. She was wearing a salmon-pink peignoir made of heavy silk, which clung to the outline of her still graceful figure. She picked up a cigarette from a side table and lit it, then rang for the maître d'. For a moment he thought she was going to have him thrown out of her room, but when a flunkey from room service appeared, she simply said:

'Scotch, no ice, tap water.'

Then, when the door had closed, she turned towards Maigret.

'I've nothing more to say to you, I'm sorry.'

'Alain is the son of Baron Lagrange.'

‘Quite possibly.’

‘And Lagrange is a friend of yours.’

She nodded with the air of someone who pities the speaker.

‘Listen, inspector, I don’t know what you came here for, but you’re wasting your time. No doubt it’s a case of mistaken identity.’

‘You *are* Jeanne Debul, are you not?’

‘That is my name. Do you want to see my passport?’

He shook his head, indicating that there was no need.

‘Baron Lagrange regularly visits you in your apartment on Boulevard Richard-Wallace, and he probably came before that to Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.’

‘I see you have been making inquiries. So now can you tell me in what way the fact that I know Lagrange explains why you have come pursuing me to London?’

‘André Delteil is dead.’

‘You mean the politician?’

‘Was he a friend of yours too?’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever met him. I’ve heard of him, of course, everyone has, because of the stir he makes in the Assembly. If I have ever seen him in the flesh, it would be at a nightclub or restaurant.’

‘He was murdered.’

‘Given his approach to politics, it wouldn’t be surprising if he had a number of enemies.’

‘The murder was committed in François Lagrange’s apartment.’

There was a knock at the door. The waiter came in with the whisky. She took a mouthful, straightforwardly, like someone who is in the habit of drinking every day at the same time and, still holding the glass, went to sit down in the armchair, crossing her legs and drawing the sides of her peignoir across them.

‘And that’s all?’ she asked.

‘Alain Lagrange, the son, has got hold of an automatic revolver and cartridges. He showed up outside your address a little while before your precipitate departure.’

‘Would you mind repeating that word?’

‘Pre-cip-it-ate.’

‘And you are in a position to know for a fact, I presume, that the previous day I had no plans to come to London?’

‘You hadn’t told anyone.’

‘Do *you* tell your housemaid what your plans are? I suppose

you've been questioning Georgette.'

'That's of no importance. Alain came to your address.'

'Well, nobody told me about it. I didn't hear anyone ring the bell.'

'That's because the concierge caught up with him on the stairs and he turned tail.'

'And he told the concierge it was me he wanted to see?'

'He didn't say anything.'

'Are you serious, inspector? Have you really come all this way to tell me a lot of trivial nonsense?'

'You received a phone call from the Baron.'

'Is that so?'

'And he told you what had happened. Or perhaps you already knew.'

He felt hot. She was giving no ground at all, sitting there, calm and elegant, in her morning négligé outfit. From time to time, she moistened her lips from the glass, but did not offer him a drink and let him stay standing, feeling clumsy and awkward.

'Lagrange is under arrest.'

'That's his business, and yours, I suppose. What does he have to say about it?'

'He's pretending to be insane.'

'Well, he's always been a bit mad.'

'But he was a friend of yours.'

'No, inspector. You can stop your devious questioning. You won't get anything out of me, for the excellent reason that I have nothing to say. You may examine my passport, and you will see from it that I come over to London for a few days from time to time. I always stay in this hotel, as the staff will confirm. As for Lagrange, poor fellow, I've known him for years.'

'How did you meet him?'

'That is none of your business, but I will tell you: in the most ordinary circumstances, in which a man and woman may meet.'

'Was he your lover?'

'I must say, you are tact personified.'

'Was he?'

'Even supposing he might have been for a night, a week, or even a month, it must be all of twelve or fifteen years ago.'

'And you remained good friends?'

'Were we supposed to quarrel, or start hitting each other?'

'You were in the habit of receiving him in the morning in your

bedroom before you got up.'

'It's morning now, the bed hasn't been made, and here you are in my bedroom.'

'Did you have any business dealings with him?'

She smiled.

'What kind of business would that be, for heaven's sake! Don't you know that any business arrangements that clown talked about were all in his mind? Didn't you make any inquiries about him? Just go to Fouquet's or Maxim's or any bar on the Champs-Élysées, and they'll soon tell you. It wasn't worth taking the boat or the plane over here to find that out.'

'And you gave him money?'

'Is that a crime?'

'A lot?'

'You will have realized by now, inspector, that I'm being very patient. I could have had you thrown out fifteen minutes ago, because you have no right to turn up like this and question me. But I will just tell you, once and for all, that you're barking up the wrong tree. Yes, I used to know Baron Lagrange in the old days, when he had some style and made a better impression. I met up with him again on the Champs-Élysées, and he did to me what he does to everyone.'

'And that is?'

'He tried to get money out of me. You can easily find that out. He's a man who's eternally short of the few hundred francs he needs to make some fantastic deal and get rich in a matter of days. Which simply means that he doesn't have enough cash to pay for the aperitif he's drinking or the Métro to get back home. I did the same as everyone else.'

'And he also came to your home to ask for more?'

'Yes, and that's all.'

'Well, all the same, his son is searching for you.'

'I've never met his son.'

'He's been in London since last night.'

'In this hotel?'

And this was the first time her voice had a slight catch in it, indicating some anxiety.

'No.'

He hesitated between two courses of action and plumped for the one he thought the better.

‘He’s staying at the Gilmore Hotel, opposite Victoria Station.’

‘And how do you know it’s me he is searching for?’

‘Because this morning he has already called in several hotels, asking for you. He seems to be working his way through the alphabet. He’ll be here in under an hour.’

‘Well, we’ll find out then what he wants with me, won’t we?’

Her voice trembled a little.

‘As I said, he’s got a gun.’

She shrugged her shoulders casually, stood up and looked at the door.

‘I suppose I ought to thank you for having the goodness to watch over me.’

‘There’s still time.’

‘For what?’

‘To talk.’

‘We’ve been doing nothing else for the past half-hour. And now I’ll ask you kindly to leave, because I need to get dressed.’

She added, with a little laugh, and in a voice that had lost some of its edge:

‘If this young man proposes to visit me, I’d better be ready, hadn’t I?’

Maigret left without another word, his shoulders hunched, infuriated both at himself and at her, since he had got nothing out of her and had felt throughout the interview that Jeanne Debul had had the upper hand. After closing the door, he stopped in the corridor. He would have liked to know whether she was telephoning or doing anything else in a hurry.

Unfortunately, the chambermaid who had earlier seen him lurking outside was coming out of a nearby room and staring at him insistently. Feeling awkward, he set off towards the lift.

Downstairs in the hall, he found the officer from the Yard settled in one of the armchairs, his eyes fixed on the revolving door. Maigret sat down alongside him.

‘Nothing?’

‘Not yet.’

At this time of day there was a great deal of coming and going. A succession of cars pulled up outside the hotel, bringing not only travellers but Londoners coming to lunch, or simply for a drink at the bar. They all looked very cheerful. Indeed, everyone had the extremely happy expression that Mr Pyke had displayed earlier,

because of the exceptional weather. Groups formed. There were always about three or four people standing at the reception desk. Women sat in armchairs, waiting for their escorts, whom they then followed into the dining room.

Maigret remembered that there was another entrance to the hotel, from the Embankment. If he had been in Paris . . . it would have been so simple. Pyke had certainly put himself out to help, but Maigret did not wish to abuse his welcome. In fact, whenever he was in England, he was always afraid of looking ridiculous. Had Inspector Pyke had the same humiliating feeling on his visit to France?

Upstairs in the corridor, for example, in France he would not have been put off his stroke by the appearance of a chambermaid. He would probably simply have said something to her, mentioning that he was from the police, and continued to keep watch.

'Beautiful day, sir, isn't it!'

Even that was beginning to get on his nerves. These people were all too satisfied with their exceptional sunshine. Nothing else seemed to matter. Passers-by in the street seemed to be walking as if in a dream.

'Do you think he'll come, sir?'

'Well, he probably will, won't he? The Savoy must be on his list.'

'I'm a little afraid that Fenton may have blundered.'

'Who is Fenton?'

'My colleague, the man Inspector Pyke posted at the Lancaster. He was supposed to sit in reception like me and wait. And then he was supposed to follow the young man.'

'And he's no good at his job?'

'It's not that, sir, he's very good. But he has red hair and a moustache. So once you've seen him, you'll remember him if you see him again.'

The officer glanced at the time and sighed.

Maigret was watching the lifts. Jeanne Debul emerged from one of them, wearing an elegant spring outfit. She appeared perfectly at ease. On her lips was the vague smile of a woman who knows she is beautiful and well dressed. Several men's eyes turned towards her. Maigret had noticed the large diamond on her finger.

Acting entirely naturally, she took a few steps into the hall, looking at the faces around her, then left her room key with the concierge and hesitated.

She had seen Maigret. Was it for his benefit that she staged the little scene?

There were two possible places to eat lunch: the large dining room opening off the back of the hall, with wide bay windows facing the Thames, and the Savoy Grill, smaller and less imposing, where there were more diners, with windows giving a view of the hotel entrance.

It was to the Grill that she eventually headed. She spoke briefly to the maître d', who led her attentively to a little table near a window.

Just then, the officer alongside Maigret said:

'Here he is.'

Maigret turned sharply to view the street and the revolving door, but saw no one corresponding to the photograph of Alain Lagrange. He was opening his mouth to ask a question, but before the words passed his lips, he understood. A little man with flaming red hair and a conspicuous moustache was approaching the door.

It wasn't Alain but the police officer, Fenton. He looked round for his colleague, went over to him and, ignoring the presence of Maigret, asked:

'He hasn't turned up?'

'No.'

'He came to the Lancaster. Then I followed him. He went to the Montreal. I'm wondering whether he saw me. He turned round two or three times. Then he suddenly jumped into a taxi. I lost a minute trying to find another myself. I've been to five hotels, and he hasn't . . .'

One of the bellhops was leaning over Maigret.

'The head clerk at reception would like a word with you,' he whispered.

Maigret followed him. The head clerk, wearing a morning coat and a flower in his buttonhole, was holding a telephone handset. He winked at Maigret, a sign that the inspector thought he could interpret. Then he spoke into the mouthpiece:

'I'll pass you on to someone who will be able to answer your question.'

Maigret took the receiver.

'Hello!'

'You speak French?'

'Yes . . . *Oui* . . . *Je parle français*.'

‘I want to know if Madame Jeanne Debul is staying at the hotel.’

‘On whose behalf?’

‘One of her friends.’

‘Do you wish to speak to her? I can put you through to her room.’

‘No . . . No.’

The voice sounded distant.

‘Her key is not on the board, so she must be in. I expect she will be downstairs before long.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Can’t I—?’

But Alain had already hung up. He was no fool, it seemed. He must have realized he was being followed, and rather than present himself in person at the different hotels, he had decided to telephone, either from a public kiosk or from a bar.

The reception clerk was now passing Maigret another telephone receiver.

‘Another call for you, Monsieur Maigret.’

This time it was Pyke asking if they could have lunch together.

‘No, it would be preferable for me to stay here.’

‘Have my men been successful?’

‘Not entirely. It’s not their fault.’

‘The trail’s gone cold?’

‘No, he will certainly be coming here, sooner or later.’

‘At any rate, they will remain at your disposal.’

‘I’ll keep the one who isn’t called Fenton, if that’s all right.’

‘Keep Bryan. Good choice. He’s intelligent. This evening perhaps?’

‘Perhaps.’

He rejoined the two Englishmen who were still chatting but fell silent as he arrived. Bryan must have been explaining to Fenton who he was, and the redhead looked contrite.

‘Thank you, Mr Fenton. I’ve picked up the whereabouts of the young man, and won’t be needing you again today. Can I offer you a drink?’

‘Never on duty.’

‘Mr Bryan, what I’d like you to do is to go and order lunch near the lady who is wearing a blue flowered jacket and skirt. If she goes out, try to follow her.’

A slight smile crept across Bryan’s features as he watched his colleague walk off.

‘You can count on me.’

‘Put the bill on my account.’

Maigret was feeling thirsty. And he went on feeling thirsty for half an hour. Since the deep armchairs made him feel warm, he stood up and wandered round the hall, ill at ease among these people speaking English, who all had a reason to be there.

How many times did he see the door revolve, sending a flash of sunlight across the walls? It seemed to happen more than before. There was a constant flow. Cars drew up and left, the old-fashioned, comfortable and picturesque London taxis, Bentleys and Rolls-Royces with impeccably turned out chauffeurs, or little sports cars.

His throat was swollen with thirst and from where he stood he could see the bar full of customers, the pale martinis, which from a distance looked so cool in their clouded glasses, and the whiskies that the men standing at the bar were holding in their hands.

But if he went in there, he would lose sight of the door. He moved closer, then retreated, and regretted sending Fenton away, since he could after all have kept watch for a few minutes. As for Bryan, he was now eating and drinking. Maigret was beginning to feel hungry as well.

He was just sitting back down with a sigh, when an elderly white-haired gentleman in the next armchair pressed an electric bell that Maigret had not noticed. A few moments later a white-jacketed waiter was leaning over him.

‘A double Scotch on the rocks, please!’

So that was how it was done! As simple as that. It had not occurred to him that he could be served in the hall.

‘The same for me too, please. Or, I suppose you don’t have any beer?’

‘Certainly, sir. What kind of beer would you like?’

The bar had all kinds, Dutch, Danish, German, and even some French export beer that Maigret had never heard of.

In France he would have asked for two glasses at once, so thirsty was he. Here, he didn’t dare. And he was furious with himself for not daring. It humiliated him to feel intimidated.

Were the waiters, the maîtres d’, the bellhops and porters more impressive than in Parisian luxury hotels? It seemed to him as though everyone was staring at him and that the old gentleman on his left was scrutinizing him with a critical eye.

Now, was Alain Lagrange going to make up his mind to come or not?

It was not the first time this had happened to him: Maigret was all at once, for no reason, losing confidence in himself. What was he doing here, when it came down to it? He had spent a sleepless night. He had drunk coffee in a concierge's lodge, then listened to the ramblings of a plump girl in pink pyjamas who kept flashing a stretch of her belly at him and had tried very hard to seem interesting.

What else? Alain Lagrange had stolen his revolver, then threatened someone in the street and seized his wallet before taking the plane to London. Meanwhile, in the Special Infirmary, the Baron was pretending to be insane.

What if he really was insane?

And supposing Alain did turn up at the hotel, what was Maigret going to do? Go up to him politely? Tell him he needed to do some explaining, and that they would have to have a talk?

And what if he tried to escape, or turned violent? What would Maigret look like in front of all these English people beaming at the good weather, if he attacked a youth? Perhaps everyone would fall on him?

This had happened to him once when he was young and was policing public transport. The moment he had clapped his hand on the shoulder of a pickpocket coming out of the Métro, the man had started yelling 'Help! Help!' And the crowd had then held on to Maigret until the local police arrived.

He was still thirsty, but hesitated to ring for a waiter, then finally pressed the white button, certain that his elderly neighbour would consider him an unmannerly fellow who drank any number of beers on end.

And then he thought he saw a figure outside, and said without thinking:

'Whisky and soda!'

'Yes, sir.'

It wasn't Alain. From closer up the man was nothing like him, and was in any case joining a girl waiting for him at the bar.

Maigret was still sitting there, bemused, with a bad taste in his mouth when Jeanne Debul, visibly in excellent spirits, walked out of the Grill towards the revolving door.

Once outside, she waited for one of the porters to hail a taxi for her. Bryan was following her, looking cheerful too, and he winked at Maigret as he went past. He seemed to be saying: 'Don't worry!'

And he got into a second taxi.

If Alain Lagrange had been doing them any favours, he would have turned up now. Jeanne Debul had left the building. There was no danger that he would rush at her and fire his automatic. The front hall was quieter than half an hour earlier. People had finished their lunch. With flushed cheeks, they were streaming out, one after another, back to their offices or for a stroll down Piccadilly or Regent Street.

'Same again, sir?'

'No, this time I'd like a sandwich.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but we are not allowed to serve food in the hall.'

He could have wept with rage.

'Oh, give me what you like, then. Yes, the same again!'

The hell with it! It wasn't his fault after all!

7.

Concerning a real bar of chocolate and a cat that caused a stir in the neighbourhood in times gone by

At three o'clock, three thirty and four o'clock, Maigret was still there, and still as uncomfortable as when, after days of sultry, stormy weather, people glower at each other, so oppressed by the heat that you expect to see them open their mouths to pant like fish out of water.

But with the difference that he was the only person in this state. There wasn't the shadow of a storm in the air. The sky above the Strand was still a brilliant blue, verging on violet, with an occasional little white cloud floating across its surface, like a feather escaping from an eiderdown.

Now and then, he found himself examining his neighbours as if he felt personal animosity towards them. At other moments, an inferiority complex weighed down on him and made him look sullen.

They were all too clean, all too sure of themselves!

The most exasperating of all was the head clerk at reception, in his elegant morning coat and stiff collar, which was not wilting with a drop of perspiration. He must have taken a liking to Maigret, or was possibly feeling sorry for him, as from time to time he flashed him a smile, intended to be both complicit and encouraging.

He seemed to be saying, over the crowd of anonymous travellers: 'We're both victims of our professional duty. Can I do anything for you?'

Maigret would no doubt have replied: 'You could bring me a sandwich!'

He felt sleepy. And hot. And hungry. When a few minutes after

three o'clock, he had rung for another glass of beer, the waiter had looked as shocked as if he had turned up at church in shirt-sleeves.

'I'm sorry, sir, but the bar is now closed until half past five!'

And Maigret had muttered something like 'Barbarians!'

Ten minutes later, he had hesitatingly approached a bellhop, the youngest and least daunting of them.

'Can you go and buy me a bar of chocolate?'

He could last out no longer without something to eat, so he devoured one by one small pieces from a bar of chocolate which he kept hidden in his pocket. By now, in this luxury hotel, he was surely looking like a caricature of a French policeman, the kind journalists describe as a clodhopper. He caught himself glancing at his reflection, and thought he appeared clumsy and badly dressed. Pyke, on the other hand, could pass for a bank manager rather than a policeman. Or perhaps an assistant bank manager. At any rate a trusted employee, a meticulous head clerk.

Would Pyke have been willing to sit and wait, as Maigret now was, without even knowing whether anything would happen?

At twenty to four, the reception clerk beckoned him over.

'Paris is on the phone for you. Perhaps you would like to take the call from the desk?'

There was a row of telephone cabins on the right, but if he had gone inside one, he would not have been able to watch the door.

'Is that you, chief?'

It did him good to hear Lucas' cheerful voice.

'Any news your end?'

'We've found the gun. I thought it best to let you know.'

'Details?'

'Just before noon, I went over to look round the old man's place.'

'Rue Popincourt?'

'Yes. I went just on the off-chance, to have another poke around everywhere. Didn't find anything. Then because I heard a baby crying down in the yard, I leaned out of the window. You probably remember, his apartment's on the top floor and the ceilings are quite low. There's a corner gutter to collect rainwater and I saw that you could reach it with your hand.'

'And the gun was in the gutter?'

'That's right, just below the window. A pretty little piece, automatic, made in Belgium. Initials on it: A. D.'

'André Delteil?'

‘Exactly. I checked at the prefecture of police. The politician had a gun permit. The number matched.’

‘And that was the murder weapon?’

‘Forensics have just given me a report by phone. I waited for it before calling you. Yes, positive.’

‘Prints?’

‘Just the dead man’s and François Lagrange’s.’

‘Anything else?’

‘The afternoon papers here are full of it. There’s a crowd of reporters in our corridor. I believe one of them has heard about your going to London, and he’s taken a plane over. Rateau has telephoned us two or three times to ask if you are making any progress.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘Lovely weather here.’

Even Lucas!

‘Have you had lunch?’

‘Yes, chief, a very good one!’

‘Well, I haven’t! Hello! Don’t cut me off please, mademoiselle. Lucas, are you listening? I want you to put a watch on the building at 7a, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, just in case. And question the taxi-drivers, in case one of them picked up Alain Lagrange anywhere; the son, you know, you’ve got his photo.’

‘Got it, chief.’

‘You need to find out whether anyone drove him on Thursday morning to Gare du Nord.’

‘I thought he’d gone overnight by plane.’

‘Never mind. Tell the chief I’ll be in touch when I have anything to report.’

‘You haven’t found the kid yet?’

Maigret preferred not to answer. It irked him to know that he had had Alain on the other end of the line, that for hours his movements across London had been tracked, minute by minute, but that they were still no further forward.

Alain Lagrange, with Maigret’s large automatic in his pocket, was somewhere around, not far away, no doubt, and all the inspector could do was watch the crowd of people coming and going before his eyes.

‘Very well, that’s all for now.’

His eyelids were stinging. He dared not sit back down in an

armchair, for fear of falling asleep. And the chocolate was making him feel sick.

He went out to take a breath of air on the street.

'Taxi, sir?'

No, he couldn't take a taxi, any more than he could go for a walk. He couldn't do anything except stay on the spot, like an imbecile.

'Lovely weather, sir!'

No sooner was he back inside the hall than his private enemy the reception clerk was calling him over, telephone in hand.

'For you, Monsieur Maigret.'

This time, it was Pyke.

'I've just had a report from Bryan, so I'm passing it on.'

'Thank you.'

'The lady left the cab at Piccadilly Circus and walked up Regent Street, doing some window-shopping. She didn't seem in a hurry. She went into two or three shops, bought various items, and asked for them to be delivered to the Savoy. Do you want a list?'

'What kind of things?'

'Lingerie, gloves, shoes. Then she went on along Old Bond Street and back down Piccadilly, and half an hour ago she went into a cinema with a continuous film show. Bryan is still watching her.'

Another detail which would ordinarily not have troubled him, but which now put him in a bad mood: instead of telephoning Maigret directly, Bryan had reported to his hierarchical superior.

'Still on for dinner tonight?'

'I'm not sure. I'm beginning to think not.'

'Fenton is distraught about what happened.'

'It wasn't his fault.'

'If you need another of my men, or even several—'

'No, thank you.'

But what in heaven's name was the wretched Alain up to? Had Maigret been mistaken about this all along?

'Can you get me the Gilmore Hotel?' he asked, once he had finished the call with Pyke.

From the reception clerk's expression, he guessed this was not a five-star hotel. And now he had to speak English, since the man at the other end didn't have a word of French.

'Did a Monsieur Alain Lagrange, who checked in with you very early this morning, come back during the day?'

'Who's speaking, please?'

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire, Paris.’

‘Hold on, please.’

He had called someone else, who must be more important, and who had a more solemn voice.

‘I beg your pardon. This is the manager of the Gilmore Hotel.’

Maigret repeated his request.

‘Why do you want to know?’

He embarked on a roundabout explanation, for want of finding the right words in English. In the end, the reception clerk took the telephone from him.

‘Allow me?’

He needed to pronounce only two sentences including a reference to Scotland Yard. When he hung up, he looked very pleased with himself.

‘These people are always a little distrustful of foreigners. The manager of the Gilmore had been wondering, in fact, whether he should call the police. The young man picked up his key and went to his room at about one o’clock. He didn’t stay there long. Later, one of the chambermaids, who was cleaning a room on the same floor, reported that her master key, which she had left in the lock, had disappeared. Does that mean anything to you?’

‘Yes, indeed.’

In fact, it altered the impression he had had so far of Alain. The young man had been thinking hard since the morning. He had told himself that if the master key of a member of staff opens all the rooms in one hotel, there’s a good chance it would open the rooms of another hotel.

Maigret went back to sit down. It was five o’clock. Suddenly, he returned to reception.

‘Do you think it would be possible for a key from the Gilmore to open any rooms here?’

‘It’s unlikely.’

‘Would you mind checking that none of your chambermaids has lost a master key today?’

‘I suppose if she had, she would have reported it to the floor manager, and *she* would have . . . Wait just a minute.’

He finished dealing with a hotel guest who wanted to change rooms because there was too much sunlight in his, then disappeared into a nearby office, where the telephone rang several times.

When he came back, he was less defensive, and his brow was

furrowed.

'You were right. A set of keys has gone missing on the sixth floor.'

'In the same way as at the Gilmore?'

'Yes, just the same. The maids all have this habit, in spite of the rules, of leaving the keys in the lock.'

'And how long ago was this?'

'Half an hour ago. Do you think this is going to cause trouble for us?'

And the man gazed round the hall with the anxious air of a captain responsible for his ship. Cost what it might, he needed to avoid the slightest mishap that might tarnish the brilliance of this beautiful summer's day.

In France, Maigret would have said: 'Give me another master key. I'm going up there. If Jeanne Debul comes back, keep her down here for a while and warn me.'

But not here. He was sure they would not let him go into another person's hotel room without a warrant.

He was prudent enough to carry on pacing in the hall for a while. Then he decided to wait for the bar to open, which was only a few minutes ahead, and neglecting briefly to watch the door, he allowed himself time to drink two half pints of beer.

'Thirsty, are we, sir?'

'Yes!'

And his 'yes' was ferocious enough to silence the smiling barman.

He worked his way round so as not to be seen from the reception desk, and took the lift, worried by the thought that his entire plan now depended on the goodwill of a member of the hotel staff.

The long corridor was empty when he reached it, and he slowed down, waiting until he saw a door open: a valet in a pinstriped waistcoat emerged, holding a pair of gentleman's shoes.

Then, with the assurance of a casual guest, whistling a tune, he headed towards the man, before feeling in his pockets, and looking embarrassed.

'Valet, please,' he said in English.

'Yes, sir.'

He kept on patting his pockets. This wasn't the same man as earlier in the day. He must have just come on duty.

'Could you be so kind as to open my door for me, to save me going downstairs to fetch my key?'

The valet was unsuspecting.

‘With pleasure, sir.’

When the door was opened, he did not look inside, where he would have seen a woman’s dressing gown hanging up.

Maigret closed the door with care, mopped his forehead and went into the middle of the bedroom, where he said in a normal voice, as if he were carrying on a conversation:

‘Well, here we are at last!’

He had not peered into the bathroom, although the door was open, nor into the cupboards. In fact, he was more apprehensive than he appeared, or than his voice would lead anyone to suspect.

‘Now then, son. At last we’re going to be able to have a little chat, just the two of us.’

He sat down heavily in an armchair, took a pipe from his pocket and lit it. He was sure that Alain Lagrange was hiding somewhere, perhaps in one of the wardrobes, perhaps under the bed.

He also knew that the young man had a gun, that he was the nervous type, and that his nerves were probably at breaking point.

‘All I’m asking is that you don’t do anything stupid.’

He thought he heard a slight noise coming from the direction of the bed. He wasn’t sure and did not bend down to look.

‘Once upon a time,’ he began, as if he were going to tell a story, ‘I saw a very funny incident, near where I live on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. It was summertime then too, one evening after a very hot day, and the heat had lingered, so all the neighbours were outside.’

He spoke slowly, and anyone walking in at that moment would have considered him to be eccentric at the very least.

‘I don’t know who first spotted the cat. I think it was a little girl who should have been in bed at that time of night. It was getting dark. She pointed at a dark shape in a tree. As usual, passers-by stopped to look. From my window, leaning out, I could see them pointing up. Other people came to join them. Before long, there were about a hundred of them around the base of the tree, so I ended up going to see for myself.’

He interrupted his story to say:

‘We’re quite alone here, which makes it easier. What was attracting the attention of all these folk on the boulevard was a cat, a large ginger cat clinging to the end of a branch. It looked terrified to find itself there. It can’t have realized how high it had climbed. It didn’t dare turn round to get down. And it didn’t dare jump either. The local women looked up and felt sorry for it. The men tried to

find a way of dislodging it from its precarious position.

'A workman who lived opposite said:

'"I'll get a double ladder."

'So they put the ladder against the tree and he climbed up. He was about a metre short of the branch, but seeing him stretch out his arm, the cat started spitting with anger and tried to scratch him.

'A small boy said:

'"I'll climb up"

'"You can't do that," people said. "The branch isn't strong enough."

'"Well, I could shake it, and you could stretch a sheet out underneath."

'He must have seen the firemen doing this, perhaps in a cinema newsreel. Things turned dramatic. A concierge brought out a bedsheet. The boy shinned up the tree and shook the branch, and the poor creature at the other end clung on with all its claws, looking wild-eyed.

'Everyone felt sorry for it.

'"Perhaps if we fetched a longer ladder?"

'"Watch out, it might be rabid; there's blood around its mouth."

'And that was true. They felt both sorry for the cat and afraid of it, understand? Nobody wanted to go to bed without knowing how the cat story would end. How could they persuade the animal that if it fell into the sheet it wouldn't come to any harm? Or get it to turn round on its perch?'

Maigret was almost expecting a voice to ask:

'So what did happen?'

But no one spoke, so he carried on:

'In the end they managed it. A big lanky man crept along one end of the branch and used a walking stick to dislodge the cat, which fell into the sheet. When they unfolded it, the cat ran away so fast that they scarcely glimpsed it cross the road and disappear through a cellar window. And that's all.'

This time, he was sure someone had moved under the bed.

'The cat was frightened because it didn't realize that nobody wished it any harm.'

Silence. Maigret puffed on his pipe.

'And I don't intend any harm to come to you either. You didn't kill André Delteil. As for my revolver, that's not such a serious matter. At your age, if I'd been in the state you were in, I might

have done the same myself. It was my fault, really. Yes, it was. If that lunchtime I hadn't gone for a drink first, I'd have arrived home half an hour earlier, and you would still have been there.'

He was speaking in a neutral, even soporific voice.

'What would have happened? You could have told me quite straightforwardly what you meant to tell me. Because it was to speak to me that you had come to our house. You had no idea that a revolver would be lying on the mantelpiece. You wanted to tell me the truth, and ask me to save your father.'

He fell silent for longer this time, to allow his words time to penetrate the young man's mind.

'Don't move yet. You don't need to. We're doing well like this. But I would just ask you to take great care with the automatic. It's a special model, and the US police are very proud of it. The trigger is so sensitive that you hardly need to touch it before it discharges. I have never used it myself. It was just a souvenir, do you understand?'

He sighed.

'Now let's see what you would have told me if I'd got back for lunch earlier. You'd have had to tell me about the corpse. Wait! There's no hurry! In the first place, I assume you weren't in on Tuesday night, when Delteil came round to see your father. If you had been there, things would have worked out differently. You must have got home when it was all over. Probably, by then, the body had been hidden in the spare room, or maybe it was already inside the trunk. Your father said nothing. I'm guessing that you don't say very much to each other.'

He caught himself once more waiting for an answer.

'Very well. Perhaps you suspected something, perhaps not. But next day, you discovered the body. You said nothing. It would be difficult to raise a subject like that with one's father.

'And your father was in a state of collapse, and sick.

'Then you thought of me, because you'd read the press cuttings that your father collected.

'And let's see, you'd probably have said something like this to me:

'"There's a corpse in our apartment. I don't know what happened, but I know my father. For a start, he's never had a gun in the house."

'Because I'll bet there's never been one, has there? I don't know your father very well, but I'm pretty sure he's scared stiff of

firearms.

'You would have gone on:

'"He wouldn't hurt a fly. But he's the one who'll be accused of murder. He won't tell the truth, because there's a woman involved."

'And if this was what you'd told me, I would of course have helped you. We would have tried together to find out the truth. And by now, more than likely, that woman would be in prison.'

Was he hoping it would happen now? He mopped his brow, waiting for a reaction that wasn't coming.

'I had quite a long conversation with your sister. I imagine you're not very fond of her. She's an egoist, completely self-centred. I have not had time to meet your brother Philippe, but he must be even more hard-hearted. They both resent your father because of the childhood they had, and yet your father did the best he could, after all. Not everyone can be strong. But *you* understood.'

Under his breath he muttered:

'Please God, don't let her come in now!'

Because if she had, it would have probably been like the story of the cat on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, with the entire population of the Savoy crowding round a frantic teenager.

'Now, I have to say that there are things that you know and I don't, but there are some things *I* know and *you* don't. Your father is at present in the Special Infirmary at police headquarters. It means he is under arrest, but there's some doubt as to whether he is entirely sane. As usual, the psychiatrists can't agree. They never do. What must be uppermost in his mind is not knowing where you are, or what you're going to do. He knows you, and he knows you're capable of following through once you've got an idea into your head.

'Jeanne Debul, at this moment, is at the cinema.

'It wouldn't help anyone if she were to be shot on returning to her room. It would in fact be extremely *unhelpful*, first because that would make it impossible to question her, and secondly because you would be taken in charge by the British judicial system, which would most probably sentence you to hang.

'So there you are, son.

'It is horribly hot in this room and I'm going to open the window. I'm not armed. People wrongly imagine that inspectors from the Police Judiciaire carry guns. In fact, they have no more right to carry them than an ordinary citizen.

‘I am not looking under the bed. I know you’re there. I know more or less what you’re thinking. It’s hard for you, of course. It’s less spectacular than shooting a woman, and taking justice into your own hands—’

He went over to the window, which he opened, then leaned his elbows on the sill, looking out.

Still no sign of movement behind him.

‘Can you not make up your mind?’

He grew impatient and turned once more to face into the room.

‘I’m beginning to think you’re less intelligent than I reckoned! What good will it do to stay there? Answer me, you silly boy! Because that’s what you are, a silly boy. You haven’t understood anything about this whole story, and if you carry on like this, *you’re* the one who’ll bring the law down on your father. Just put the gun down, hear me? I forbid you to touch it. Put it on the floor. And now, come out from under there.’

He seemed genuinely angry. Perhaps he really was. At any rate, he was in a hurry to be done with this unpleasant conversation. As in the case of the cat, one false move, one thought occurring to the young man would be enough to—

‘And get a move on! She’ll be back before long. It will look really ridiculous if she finds us both here, you under the bed and me trying to get you to come out. I’m going to count to three. One . . . two . . . and if you’re not out by three, I’ll call the hotel detective.’

Then, at last, two feet appeared: shoes with worn soles, then some cotton socks and the turn-ups of a pair of trousers which rode up as the boy crawled out.

To help him, Maigret returned to the window and could hear first someone sliding on the floor, then the slight sound of the same person getting to his feet. He had not forgotten that the young man had a gun, but he was giving him time to collect himself.

‘Are you out now?’

He turned round. Alain was facing him, his navy-blue suit covered in dust, his tie awry, and his hair tousled. He was very pale, his lips trembled and his gaze seemed to be staring right through the objects in the room.

‘Now, give me back my automatic.’

Maigret held out his hand, and the youth felt in his right pocket and held out his hand in turn.

‘That’s better, don’t you think?’

He heard a faint ‘Yes’.

Then straight away:

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Well, first of all, have something to eat and drink. Aren’t you hungry?’

‘Yes . . . I don’t know.’

‘Well, I am *very* hungry, and there’s an excellent grill room downstairs.’

He made towards the door.

‘What have you done with the master key?’

Alain took not one but a whole bunch of keys from his trouser pocket.

‘You’d better let me hand those back in at reception, otherwise they might make a song and dance about them.’

In the corridor, he stopped in front of his own door.

‘Best if we go in here and freshen up a bit.’

He didn’t want there to be a scene. He was aware that they were on a knife edge. That was why he was keeping the young man’s mind occupied with ordinary material details.

‘Do you have a comb?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you can use mine. It’s clean.’

He almost received a smile at this.

‘Why are you doing all this?’

‘All what?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Perhaps because I was young once. And because I had a father. Now brush your clothes a bit. Take the jacket off. The springs on that bed can’t have been cleaned for a long time.’

He himself washed his face and hands.

‘I think perhaps I’m going to change my shirt again. I’ve been sweating so much today!’

And he proceeded to take off his shirt, so that Alain saw him bare-chested, with his braces hanging down at his sides.

‘You have no luggage, of course?’

‘I don’t think I can go into the Savoy Grill like this.’

Maigret looked at him critically.

‘Well, your shirt isn’t the cleanest. I suppose you slept in it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I can’t lend you one of mine. It would be far too big.’

This time, Alain really smiled.

'Well, too bad if the waiters pull faces. We'll have a chat in a quiet corner and we'll try to get them to serve us a nice cold glass of white wine. They should have some of that.'

'I don't drink.'

'Never?'

'I tried once and I was so ill I didn't try again.'

'Do you have a girlfriend?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you shy?'

'I don't know.'

'You've never wanted to go out with a girl?'

'Perhaps. I think so. But it hasn't happened.'

Maigret gave up. He had understood. And on leaving the room, he put his large hand on his companion's shoulder.

'You know, you really gave me a fright, young man.'

'A fright? Why?'

'Would you have fired the gun?'

'At who?'

'At her.'

'Yes!'

'And then shot yourself?'

'Maybe. Afterwards, I think I would have.'

They passed the valet from earlier, who looked round at them. Possibly he had seen them coming out of Room 604, whereas Maigret had gone into 605.

They took the lift down. Maigret had his own key in his hand, as well as the bunch of master keys. He headed for reception. And he was counting on a little triumph over his private enemy, the man in the well-cut morning coat. He wanted to see the clerk's face when he spotted them together, and received the master keys.

Alas! It was not him on duty now but a tall pale young man with fair hair, who wore an identical coat and buttonhole. He didn't know Maigret at all.

'I found these keys in the corridor.'

'Thank you, sir,' he replied, with an indifferent air.

When Maigret turned round, there was Bryan standing in the middle of the hall. To judge by his expression, he was asking if they

could have a word.

'Excuse me a moment,' Maigret said to Alain.

He went over to the English policeman.

'You've found him? Is that him?'

'Yes. It is.'

'The lady's just come back.'

'Has she gone up to her room?'

'No, she's gone into the bar.'

'On her own?'

'She's chatting to the barman. What shall I do?'

'Would you mind keeping an eye on her for another hour or two?'

'No problem.'

'If she looks likely to go out again, let me know. I'll be in the Grill.'

Alain had made no effort to run away. Looking awkward and embarrassed, he was waiting, standing apart from the crowd.

'Enjoy your meal, sir.'

'Thank you.'

He rejoined the young man and propelled him over to the Grill, saying:

'I could eat a horse!'

And he surprised himself by remarking, as he went through a ray of sunshine striking into the hall through a large bay window:

'It is *such* a beautiful day!'

8.

In which Maigret would like to be God the Father and in which air travel does not suit everybody

'Do you like lobster?'

Only Maigret's eyes could be seen over the top of the gigantic menu the head waiter had handed him, and Alain had no idea what to do with his own menu: he was too shy to read it.

'Yes, monsieur,' he answered, like a child in school.

'Very well, we'll treat ourselves to *homard à l'américaine*. But before that I'd like plenty of hors d'oeuvres. Waiter!'

And, once he had ordered:

'When I was your age, I preferred tinned lobster, and when people said that was sacrilege, I said it had more taste. We only opened a tin of lobster about every six months, on special occasions, because we weren't rich.'

He leaned back in his chair.

'Did it make you very unhappy, being short of money?'

'I don't know, monsieur. I would have preferred it if my father hadn't had such trouble bringing us up.'

'You really won't have a drink?'

'Just water.'

But Maigret nonetheless ordered a bottle for himself, a Rhine wine, and they were given wine glasses the colour of absinthe, with darker green stems.

The lights were on in the Grill, but the sun was still shining outside. The room was filling up fast, with waiters and maîtres d' circulating noiselessly in their black uniform. What fascinated Alain most were the trolleys. One of them, heaped with different hors d'oeuvres, had been wheeled over to their table, and there were

others, laden with pastries and desserts. One enormous silver-plated trolley had a dome on top that opened up like a box.

'Before the war, they used to put a quarter of a roasted ox in there,' Maigret explained. 'I think you eat the best roast beef in the world here. The most impressive, anyway. These days, they put a turkey inside it. Do you like turkey?'

'I think so.'

'If you've still got some appetite left after the lobster, we could order a dish of turkey.'

'I'm not hungry.'

Sitting at their little table, they must have looked to outsiders like a rich uncle up from the country treating his nephew to a slap-up dinner at the end of the school year.

'I lost my mother very young, like you, and I was brought up by my father.'

'Did he take you to school?'

'No, he couldn't, he had to go to work. We lived in the country.'

'When I was little, my father took me to school and fetched me. He was the only man waiting at the school doors, among all the mothers. When we got back, he cooked supper for us all.'

'Was there a time when you had servants?'

'Did he tell you that? You've talked to him?'

'Yes, I talked to him.'

'Is he worried about me?'

'I'll telephone Paris presently, so that they can reassure him.'

Alain had not realized that he was eating hungrily, and he even drank a large mouthful of wine which the waiter had automatically served him. He didn't pull a face.

'It never lasted long.'

'What didn't?'

'Having servants. My father was so keen for things to improve that he went in for wishful thinking. From now on, children, he would say, we're going to live like everyone else. We're moving house tomorrow.'

'So you moved about?'

'Every now and then. We'd arrive in a new apartment with no furniture in it at first. It would be delivered once we were there. And there were new faces, women that my father hired through the employment agency, and who we were supposed to call by their first names. Then almost at once, the creditors would start showing

up, bailiffs waiting for hours thinking my father was out, when he was hiding in one of the rooms. In the end, they'd cut off the gas and electricity. It's not his fault, he's very intelligent. He had plenty of ideas. Listen, here's an example.'

Maigret leaned forward the better to hear, his expression mild and his face full of sympathy.

'It was years ago, but I remember that for a long time, two years maybe, he went hawking round a lot of offices a project for developing and modernizing a port in Morocco. People fobbed him off with vague promises. If it had come to anything, we'd have gone to live there and been very rich. When the proposals reached a higher level, they just shrugged their shoulders. They more or less treated my father as mad for thinking of creating a huge port in that place. Now the Americans have built it.'

'I see!'

Maigret knew this kind of man so well! But could he explain that to his son, in present circumstances? What good would it do? The two other children, the older son and the daughter, had long ago realized the truth and left home without any feelings of gratitude to the father who had, all the same, brought them up. From those two, he could not expect an ounce of pity.

Only Alain still believed in him. And that was odd, because Alain looked so like his sister that it was disconcerting.

'A few more mushrooms?'

'No thanks.'

The scene on the street was catching Alain's attention. It was the time of day when, as earlier at lunchtime, cars were rolling up one after another, stopping a minute or so under the awning, where a porter in grey livery would dash forward to hold the door.

Unlike at midday, the people getting out of the cars were almost all in evening dress. There were many young couples and some whole families. Most of the women were wearing orchids in their corsage. The men were in tails or tuxedos and through the glass partition they could be seen coming and going in the hall before taking their seats in the grand dining room, from which the strains of a palm court orchestra could be heard.

It had been a beautiful day from start to finish, and there was just enough light left in the setting sun to bathe their faces in an unreal glow.

'How long did you stay at school?'

‘Until I was fifteen and a half.’

‘High school?’

‘Yes. I spent four years there, then I left.’

‘Why?’

‘I wanted to earn money to help my father out.’

‘Were you good at schoolwork?’

‘Yes, quite good. Except for maths.’

‘Did you find a job straight away?’

‘I got one in an office.’

‘Did your sister give her earnings to your father?’

‘No, she just paid for her keep. She worked it out in detail, but she didn’t count the rent, or lighting and heating. And she used more electricity than anyone else, because she read in bed half the night.’

‘And you handed him all your pay?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t smoke?’

‘No.’

The arrival of the lobster interrupted their conversation for a good while. Alain too seemed more relaxed. But sitting as he was with his back to the door, he turned round towards it from time to time.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Whether she’ll come.’

‘You think she will?’

‘I noticed that you went to talk to that man, and then you glanced across at the bar. I deduced she was in there.’

‘Do you know her?’

‘I’ve never spoken to her.’

‘And would she recognize you?’

‘Yes, she would.’

‘Where has she seen you before?’

‘Two weeks ago, on Boulevard Richard-Wallace.’

‘Did you go up to her apartment?’

‘No, I was on the other side of the street, outside the gates.’

‘You’d followed your father there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

Maigret had gone too far too fast. Alain shrank back.

‘I don’t understand why you’re doing all this.’

‘All what?’

With his eyes, he indicated the Grill, the table, the lobster, the luxury with which he was being surrounded by the man who should logically have been putting him in prison.

‘We both needed to eat, didn’t we? I hadn’t had anything since this morning. What about you?’

‘I had a sandwich in a milk bar.’

‘So we’re having dinner. Afterwards, we’ll see.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Probably, we’ll take the plane back together to Paris. Do you like flying?’

‘Not much.’

‘Have you been abroad before?’

‘No. Last year I was supposed to go to Austria to a holiday camp. It’s an organization that runs exchanges between the two countries. I’d signed up for it and they told me to get a passport. Then when my turn came up, I had sinusitis and was ill in bed.’

Silence. Alain too was returning to the subject that preoccupied them both, and he had to get there without being prompted.

‘Have you two spoken to each other?’ he asked.

‘Who do you mean?’

‘Her.’

‘Yes, this morning in her room.’

‘And what did she say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘*She’s* the one who’s brought all this trouble down on my father. But you’ll see, it won’t be possible to pin anything on her.’

‘You believe that?’

‘You must admit you wouldn’t dare arrest her.’

‘And why would that be?’

‘I don’t know. It’s always the same with her. She’s taken great care.’

‘And you know what business she had with your father?’

‘Not exactly. It’s only in the last few weeks that I found out who she is.’

‘But *he’s* known her a long time.’

‘He met her soon after my mother died. In those days, he made no secret of it. I don’t remember because I was a baby, but Philippe told me. Father had announced that he was going to marry again, that it would be much better for all of us because there’d be a

woman to look after us. Now that I've seen her and I know what kind of woman she is, I'm sure she was stringing him along.'

'I think you're probably right, yes.'

'Philippe says that Father was very unhappy about it, he would often cry himself to sleep. Then he didn't see her for years after that. Perhaps she left Paris, or perhaps she'd moved away and not told him her new address.

'About two years ago, I noticed a change in my father.'

'What kind of change?'

'It's hard to say. His mood was different. He was more serious, but especially he was anxious. When he heard footsteps on the stairs outside, he would jump, and he would only be reassured when it was a tradesman, even if he was coming to be paid.

'My brother had left home by then. My sister had announced that she was going to do the same as soon as she was twenty-one. It didn't happen overnight, you know. It was only at times that I started to notice the difference. Before, when he was in a bar – because I sometimes had to meet him there after running some errand – he only drank Vichy water. But he started drinking aperitifs, and some nights he would come home very out of sorts, claiming he had a headache. His manner towards me wasn't the same, he seemed embarrassed and impatient whenever he said anything to me.'

'Eat up.'

'I'm sorry, I don't feel hungry any more.'

'A dessert perhaps?'

'If you like.'

'And was it then that you started following him?'

Alain hesitated before answering. He frowned and stared hard at Maigret, and at that moment he looked so like his sister that Maigret had to avert his eyes.

'It's perfectly normal that you should have tried to find out what was going on.'

'But I *don't* know what's going on!'

'Agreed. All you know is that he often went to visit this woman, usually in the late morning. You followed him to Boulevard Richard-Wallace; you said so yourself just now. You were down on the street, at the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. Your father and his companion must have gone to the window of the apartment. And that's when she saw you?'

‘Yes, she pointed at me. Probably because I was looking up at the window.’

‘And your father will have told her who you were. Did he mention it after that?’

‘No. I was expecting him to raise it, but he didn’t.’

‘What about you?’

‘I didn’t dare.’

‘Did you find some money?’

‘How did you know that?’

‘Own up. You looked inside your father’s wallet in the evening. Not to take any money out, just to know.’

‘Not his wallet, he put the money under his shirts in a drawer.’

‘A lot?’

‘Sometimes a hundred thousand francs, sometimes more, sometimes only fifty thousand.’

‘And was that often?’

‘It depended. About once or twice a week.’

‘And after one of those evenings, he would go to Boulevard Richard-Wallace?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the money wasn’t there any more?’

‘She left him a few banknotes.’

Alain noticed a gleam in Maigret’s eyes as the inspector looked at the door, but he had sufficient self-control not to turn round. He was well aware that Jeanne Debul had walked in.

Behind her, Bryan was addressing a questioning glance at Maigret, who let him know the same way that he could go off duty.

If she had left it so late, it was because she had gone upstairs from the bar to change. She was not in full evening dress but wore an elegant gown from an haute-couture fashion house. On her wrist was a large diamond bracelet, and she was wearing diamond earrings as well.

She had not seen Alain and the inspector, and was following the maître d’ while most of the women in the room scrutinized her.

She was shown to a table less than six metres away from them, almost facing them. She sat down, looked round as she was handed the menu, caught Maigret’s eye, and immediately focused on his companion.

Maigret was smiling the smile of a man who has had a good dinner and is feeling at peace. Alain, who had blushed deeply, did

not dare to turn round towards her.

'Has she seen me?'

'Yes.'

'What's she doing?'

'She's taunting me.'

'What do you mean?'

'She's pretending to be completely at ease, smoking a cigarette and leaning over to look at the hors d'oeuvres on the trolley. Now she's talking to the waiter and flashing her diamonds.'

'And you're not going to arrest her, are you?' said the boy, bitterly and with a touch of defiance.

'I won't arrest her today, because, don't you see, if I was imprudent enough to do that, she would be able to wriggle out of it.'

'She'll *always* be able to wriggle out of it, while my father—'

'No. Not always. Here in England, I'm at a disadvantage, because I'd have to prove that she had committed the kind of crime that's subject to the laws on extradition. But she won't stay for ever in London. She needs Paris too much. She'll go back, and I'll have had time to look into her case. Even if it's not right away, her turn will come. Sometimes we leave people at liberty, and give them the impression that they're putting one over on us, for months, or even years. You can look round at her. No need for you to feel ashamed. She's putting on a show. All the same, she would much rather be in your shoes than in hers. Suppose I'd left you there, under her bed? She'd have gone upstairs. And by now—'

'Don't go on.'

'Would you have fired the gun?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Alain muttered between gritted teeth:

'Because!'

'Do you wish you had?'

'I don't know. There's no justice.'

'Yes, there is, and justice is doing the best it can. Of course, if I was God the Father, instead of merely being the head of the Crime Squad and having to report to my superiors, to the examining magistrate, the state prosecutor and even the press, I'd arrange things differently.'

'How?'

‘Well, first of all, I’d forget you pinched my revolver. I could still do that. Then I’d try to see to it that a certain businessman from somewhere in the provinces also forgets that his wallet was taken from him at gunpoint, instead of simply being lost.’

‘The gun wasn’t loaded.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

‘I took care to take the cartridges out. I just needed money to come to London.’

‘You knew that the Debul woman was here?’

‘I’d followed her in the morning. First, I tried to go up to her apartment. But the concierge—’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘When I came out of the building, there was a policeman at the door, and I thought he must have come for me. I went round the block. When I got back, he’d gone. I hid in the park, waiting for her to come out.’

‘To shoot her?’

‘Maybe. She must have phoned for a taxi. I couldn’t get close. But I was lucky and got another taxi on its way back from Puteaux, so I followed her to the station. I saw her get into the Calais train. But I didn’t have enough money to buy a ticket.’

‘Why didn’t you kill her when she was standing at the train door?’

Alain shuddered, looked at Maigret to see if he was serious and whispered:

‘I didn’t dare.’

‘If you didn’t dare shoot when you were in a crowd, you probably wouldn’t have shot her in the hotel room either. Had you been following your father for a matter of weeks?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have a list of the people he went to see?’

‘I could write one out from memory. He went several times to a small bank in Rue Chauchat, and to a newspaper, where he visited the deputy editor. He made a lot of phone calls and was always turning round to make sure he wasn’t being followed.’

‘And did you guess what it was all about?’

‘Not at first. But, by chance, I read this novel about it.’

‘About what?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Blackmail?’

‘It was *her*.’

‘Of course it was. That’s why it will take a little time to lay hands on her. I don’t know what kind of life she led before she moved to Boulevard Richard-Wallace. It was probably quite eventful, and she will have known all kinds of people. A woman is better placed than a man to discover people’s little secrets, especially ones they’re ashamed of. When she was past the age for that kind of life, she thought of turning her acquaintances to good account.’

‘She used my father.’

‘Exactly. She didn’t go herself to visit her victims and separate them from their money. Your father was a man who was always about town, and who didn’t have any obvious profession. It didn’t look surprising. People almost expected it of him.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because we have to face facts. Perhaps your father was still in love with her. That’s my opinion, anyway. He’s the kind of man who would remain faithful to a passion like that. And Jeanne Debul at least gave him enough to live on. But he went in fear of being caught. He was ashamed. He dared not look you in the face.’

Alain turned with a fierce glare in the direction of the woman, who wore a thin scornful smile.

‘One strawberry tart, please, waiter.’

‘Aren’t you having any?’ Alain protested.

‘I don’t often take dessert. Bring me a coffee and a brandy.’

He pushed back his chair a little and took his pipe from his pocket. He was busy packing it when the head waiter came over and whispered a few words apologetically.

Then Maigret stuffed the pipe back in his pocket and stopped a passing trolley carrying cigars.

‘You’re not going to smoke your pipe?’

‘No, it’s not allowed in here. By the way, have you paid for your hotel room?’

‘No.’

‘Have you still got the master key from the Gilmore that you took in the corridor?’

He handed it across the table.

‘Nice tart?’

‘Yes.’

Alain’s mouth was full. He was still only a child, unable to resist something sweet, and at that moment he was entirely concentrating

on his dessert.

'Did he often see Delteil?'

'I saw him go twice to Delteil's office.'

Was it really necessary to reveal the whole truth? It was more than likely that the politician, whose wife was asking for a divorce and who would therefore soon find himself with no money and obliged to leave his mansion on Avenue Henri-Martin, was using his influence in return for payments. It was a more serious matter for him than for others, since he had built his entire political career on denouncing other people's scandals and corruption.

Had Jeanne Debul pushed him too hard? Maigret had a different view on that.

'Did your father stop saying he was going to change your standard of living?'

Despite the strawberry tart, Alain's head went up in sudden alarm.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you said that in the past he would periodically announce that everything was going to change. Then there came a time when his faith in his star seemed to waver.'

'He went on hoping, though.'

'But less than before?'

'Yes.'

'And recently?'

'He once or twice talked about going to live in the south.'

Maigret did not press the point. It was his own affair now. It would serve nothing to explain to the son what he deduced.

François Lagrange, who had been running errands for the Debul woman for two years but was being rewarded only with crumbs, had perhaps devised the idea of working on his own account.

So, supposing that Jeanne Debul had ordered him to demand 100,000 francs from Delteil, who was thought to be very wealthy . . . and supposing the Baron had asked him for a million? Or more? Lagrange was the kind of man who talked in terms of large sums, having spent his life juggling imaginary fortunes.

And Delteil had decided he wasn't going to pay up.

'Where were you, on Tuesday night?'

'I went to the cinema.'

'Your father had suggested you go out?'

Alain appeared to concentrate. This idea seemed to be striking

him for the first time.

'Yes, I think so. He said, well I think he said, there was a new film showing on the Champs-Élysées. And—'

'And when you got back, he was in bed?'

'Yes, I went in to kiss him goodnight, like every night. He was unwell. He promised he'd call the doctor.'

'And you thought that normal?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I felt anxious. I found it hard to get to sleep. There was an unusual smell in the flat. American cigarettes. In the morning I woke at dawn, and walked round all the rooms. My father was still asleep. I noticed that the box room, which had been my bedroom when I was younger, was locked and that the key wasn't in the lock. I opened it.'

'How did you do that?'

'With a hook. A trick I learned at school. You bend some wire a certain way and—'

'Yes, I know, I've done the same thing.'

'Well, I still had one of those old wire hooks in my drawer. Then I saw the trunk in the middle of the room, and I lifted the lid.'

It was best to move quickly on now.

'Did you say anything to your father?'

'I just couldn't.'

'You went straight out?'

'Yes. I walked the streets. I wanted to go to that woman's place . . .'

There must have been a scene, the details of which would never be known unless the Baron one day stopped claiming to be insane: the scene in the apartment between François Lagrange and André Delteil. It didn't concern Alain, and it was pointless to destroy the image he still had of his father.

It was unlikely that the politician had gone to see Lagrange with the intention of killing him. More probably, he wanted to regain possession of the compromising documents which had led to the blackmail, using threats if he had to.

And surely it would look like an unequal contest? Delteil was full of sarcasm. He was a man used to the cut and thrust of political life, and he was faced only by a fat coward, trembling for his survival.

The papers were not in the apartment. Even if Lagrange had

agreed to hand them over, he would not have been able to.

What had he done? He had no doubt burst into tears, begged for forgiveness. He had promised . . .

And all the time, he would have been hypnotized by the revolver which was levelled at him.

Yet he was the one, who through his very weakness, had finally gained the upper hand. How had he managed to get hold of the gun? By what trick had he managed to distract the politician's attention?

And now he wasn't trembling any more. It was his turn to speak firmly and issue threats.

He had probably not meant to pull the trigger. He was too cowardly, too used to shrinking away and receiving kicks up his backside, ever since his schooldays.

'Then in the end I went to your apartment.'

Alain turned to look at Jeanne Debul, who was attempting in vain to catch some of their conversation. The sounds in the restaurant, the clatter of crockery, knives and forks, the murmur of conversations, laughter and the music coming from the large dining room, prevented her being able to hear them.

'We might as well get going . . .'

Alain's expression registered a mute protest:

'And you're going to leave her here?'

The woman too was surprised to see Maigret walk past her without a word. It all seemed too easy to her. Perhaps she had been hoping for a scene, in which she would have played a starring role.

In the front hall, where he could at last take his pipe out of his pocket and victoriously crush out his cigar in a huge sand-filled ashtray, Maigret murmured:

'Can you wait a moment?'

He went over to the porter.

'When is the next plane for Paris?'

'There's one in ten minutes, but of course you can't catch that. The next one's at half past six in the morning. Do you wish me to book a ticket?'

'Two.'

'Names?'

He gave them to him. Alain had not moved, and was staring at the bright lights of the Strand.

'Just a moment. I've got a phone call to make.'

He need no longer call from the reception desk. He could go into one of the cabins.

'Pyke, is that you? I'm very sorry not to have been able to have lunch or dinner with you. And I won't see you tomorrow either. I'm leaving tonight.'

'The six-thirty plane? I'll give you a lift.'

'But—'

'See you soon.'

It was best to let him do it: otherwise he would feel frustrated. Curiously enough, Maigret was no longer sleepy.

'Shall we take a little stroll outside?'

'If you like.'

'Otherwise, I won't have set foot on the pavements of London in my whole trip!'

It was true. Was it because he was conscious of being abroad? It seemed to him that the streetlamps shone differently from the Parisian ones, the night was a different colour, and that even the air tasted different.

They walked along unhurriedly, looking at the entrances to the cinemas and bars. After Charing Cross, they came to a huge square with a column in the centre.

'Did you come this way this morning?'

'I think so, this looks familiar.'

'It's Trafalgar Square.'

Maigret took pleasure in recognizing several sights with which he was familiar, before they left London, and he took Alain along as far as Piccadilly Circus.

'Now all we have to do is to go to bed.'

Alain could very well have run away. Maigret would not have lifted a finger to stop him. But he knew the young man would not do that.

'I'd just like a glass of beer. Do you mind?'

It wasn't so much the beer as the atmosphere inside a London pub that Maigret was after. Alain did not drink anything, and waited in silence.

'Do you like London?'

'I don't know.'

'You might be able to come back here in a few months. Because a few months is all you'll get.'

'Will I be able to see my father?'

‘Yes.’

A little further on, Alain sniffed, which Maigret affected not to notice.

As they returned to the hotel, the inspector slipped the master key and some money into an envelope, which he addressed to the Gilmore Hotel.

‘I nearly took it back to France with me!’

And then to Alain, who looked lost:

‘Are you coming?’

They took the lift. There was a light under Jeanne Debul’s door, and she was no doubt expecting Maigret to call on her. She would have a long wait.

‘Go on in. There are twin beds.’

And then as his companion looked awkward:

‘You can just lie down in your clothes if you prefer.’

He ordered a morning call for half past five, and fell into a deep sleep. As for Alain, the ringing of the telephone did not wake him up.

‘Come on, son, up you get!’

Did François Lagrange usually wake him up?

Right to the end, this was not a case like any other.

‘I must say I’m feeling very pleased.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you didn’t shoot. Let’s drop the subject now.’

Pyke was waiting for them downstairs, looking just the same as yesterday, and it was another glorious morning.

‘Lovely day, isn’t it?’

‘Splendid!’

The car was at the door. Maigret realized that he had not introduced his companion.

‘Alain Lagrange, Mr Pyke of Scotland Yard.’

Pyke indicated that he had understood, and did not ask any questions. Throughout the drive, he talked about the flowers in his garden, in particular an extraordinary shade of hydrangea that he had managed to grow, after years of experimenting.

The plane took off into a cloudless sky, with just a little early morning mist.

‘What are these?’ the young man asked, pointing to the stiff paper bags placed for the passengers’ convenience.

‘In case anyone feels sick.’

Was that why, a few minutes later, Alain turned first white, then green, and with a desperate glance, leaned over the bag? He would have given anything not to be sick, especially in front of Detective Chief Inspector Maigret!

9.

In which Maigret discovers the dish tête de veau en tortue*, and describes London to Madame Maigret*

It had been just the same as usual, except that this time a month had not passed since their last dinner, far from it. Pardon's voice had come down the line:

'Are you free tomorrow evening?'

'Yes, probably.'

'With your wife, of course.'

'Yes.'

'Do you like *tête de veau en tortue*?'

'Never heard of it.'

'Well, do you like calf's head?'

'It's all right.'

'Well, you're going to love it in this special sauce. It's a dish I discovered when I was in Belgium. You'll see. But I'm not sure what wine to serve with it. Beer perhaps?'

At the last moment, Pardon had opted, as he explained, almost scientifically, for a light Beaujolais.

Maigret and his wife had come on foot, and avoided looking at Rue Popincourt as they went past. Their fellow-guest was Jussieu from the forensic lab – according to Madame Maigret a confirmed bachelor.

'I did want Professor Journe to join us. But he said he never goes out to dinner. For the last twenty years, he's always eaten at home.'

The French windows were open, the curved shapes of the wrought-iron balcony outlined against the blue of the evening.

'Beautiful night, isn't it?'

Maigret gave a little smile that no one else would have been able

to understand. He took two helpings of the Belgian dish. When they were drinking their coffee, Pardon, who was passing round the cigars, absent-mindedly offered the box to Maigret.

'No thank you! Only at the Savoy!'

'You smoked a cigar at the Savoy?' his wife said in surprise.

'Had to! They came and whispered that my pipe wasn't allowed.'

Pardon had arranged this dinner party with the sole aim of talking about the Lagrange affair, and everyone was taking care not to broach the subject. They chatted in a desultory way about everything else, except the matter they were all thinking about.

'So you went to visit Scotland Yard?'

'No, I didn't have time.'

'How do you get on with them?'

'Excellently. They really are the most tactful of people.'

And he genuinely thought that, feeling a certain affection for Mr Pyke, who had waved them goodbye as the plane took off and who had perhaps been secretly moved by the circumstances.

'Are you busy at Quai des Orfèvres these days?'

'Just the usual. Are your patients keeping *you* busy?'

'Just the usual.'

Then they talked a little about medical matters. So it was ten o'clock when Pardon decided to whisper:

'Have you seen him?'

'Yes. Have you?'

'I've been round twice.'

The women were discreetly pretending not to listen. As for Jussieu, the case did not concern him any more, so he had gone to look out of the window.

'Has he been confronted with the son?'

'Yes.'

'And did he say anything?'

Maigret shook his head.

Because François Lagrange had stuck to his first attitude, shrinking into himself like a frightened animal. When anyone approached him, he cowered against the wall, his arm raised across his face to ward off blows.

'Don't hit me, please don't hit me!'

And his teeth were actually chattering.

'What does Journe think about him?'

This time it was Maigret asking the question.

‘Journe is an expert, perhaps one of our best psychiatrists. But he is also petrified by the burden of responsibility.’

‘I can understand that.’

‘And, as well as that, he has always been against the death penalty.’

Maigret made no comment, puffing gently on his pipe.

‘One day, when I was talking to him about fishing, he looked horrified. He won’t even kill a fish.’

‘So . . .?’

‘Well, if François Lagrange carries on like this for another month —’

‘And will he?’

‘He’s frightened enough to do it. Unless anyone pushes him to the limit.’

Pardon looked intently at Maigret. This was the sole reason for the dinner party, and the question he had long been waiting to ask, and which he conveyed only by his expression.

‘Well, as far as I’m concerned,’ Maigret said quietly, ‘it’s out of my hands. I’ve put in my report. Rateau, the examining magistrate, will abide by the decision of the experts.’

Why did Pardon look at him with what seemed to be gratitude? It was embarrassing. Maigret felt a little annoyed with him for his indiscretion. It was true that it was out of his hands. But he could obviously have—

‘I’ve got other fish to fry,’ he said, standing up. ‘Among various things, a certain Jeanne Debul. She came back to Paris yesterday. She still means to brazen it out. But I hope to have her in my office within a couple of months, and then we’ll have a proper tête-à-tête, just the two of us.’

‘Anyone would think she’d wronged you personally,’ remarked Madame Maigret, who had nevertheless appeared not to be listening.

They dropped the subject. A quarter of an hour later, on the dark street, Madame Maigret slipped her hand through her husband’s arm.

‘Funny thing,’ he said. ‘In London, the streetlamps, although they’re *almost* the same . . .’

And as they walked, he described to her the Strand, Charing Cross and Trafalgar Square.

‘I thought you hardly had time even to eat anything while you

were there.’

‘I went out for a stroll, for a few minutes after dinner.’

‘Alone?’

‘No. With him.’

She didn’t ask who he meant. As they approached Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, he must have remembered the London pub where he had drunk a glass of beer before going to bed. It made him feel thirsty.

‘Would you mind if . . .?’

‘No, of course not. Go and have your drink, I’ll wait.’

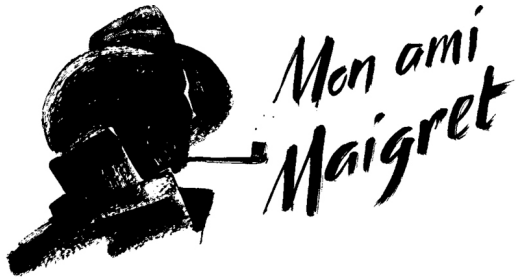
Because it was a little bar where she would have felt out of place. When he emerged, wiping his mouth, she took his arm again.

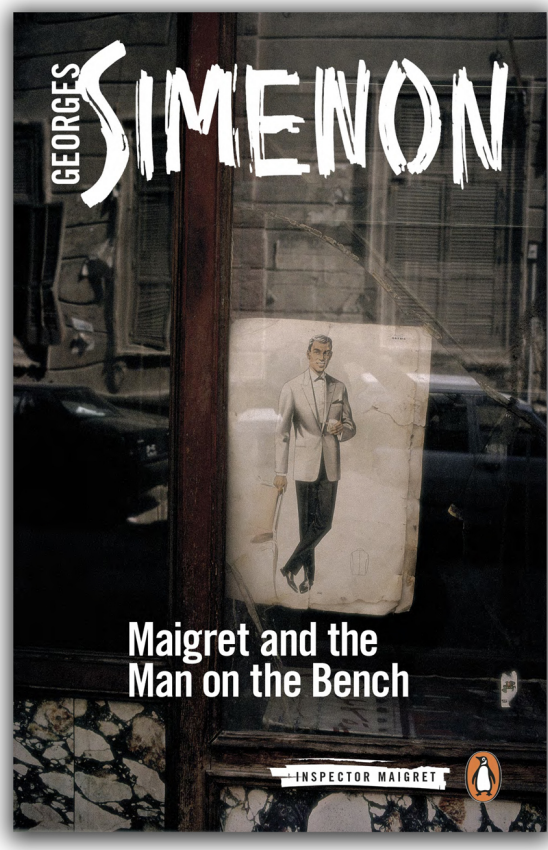
‘Lovely night.’

‘Yes.’

‘Lots of stars.’

Why was it that, seeing a cat slinking into a cellar window as they approached, his face clouded over for a moment?


Mon ami
Maigret


GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and the
Man on the Bench
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1. The Yellow Shoes

For Maigret the date was easy to remember, as it was his sister-in-law's birthday: 19 October. It was a Monday, which also made it memorable, as it is common knowledge at Quai des Orfèvres that murders rarely take place on Mondays. And as well as this, it was the first investigation of the year that had a feel of winter about it.

It had rained all day Sunday, a fine, cold drizzle; the rooftops and the pavements were black and glistening, and a yellowish mist seemed to creep in through the gaps in the windows, leading Madame Maigret to say:

'I should think about getting some draught excluders put in.'

Every autumn for the last five years at least Maigret had promised to fit them himself the following Sunday.

'You should wear your thick overcoat.'

'Where is it?'

'I'll go and look for it.'

It was 8.30. All the apartments still had their lights on, and Maigret's overcoat smelled of mothballs.

It didn't rain that day. At least, not a rain that you could see, but the pavements remained damp and became progressively more slippery as the crowds walked over them. Then, around four in the afternoon, a short while before it got dark, that same yellowish mist of the morning returned, blurring the lights of the streetlamps and the shop windows.

When the telephone rang, neither Lucas nor Janvier nor young Lapointe were in the room. It was answered by Santoni, a Corsican who was new to the brigade, having worked ten years in the Gambling Squad and then Vice.

'It's Inspector Neveu from the third arrondissement, chief. He wants to speak to you in person. It seems it's urgent.'

Maigret grabbed the receiver.

'What is it, my friend?'

'I'm ringing you from a bar on Boulevard Saint-Martin. A body

has been found, stabbed with a knife.'

'On the street?'

'No. Not exactly. In a sort of side passageway.'

Neveu had been on the force for a long time, so he knew right away what Maigret was thinking. Stabbings, especially in a working-class area, weren't usually of much interest. Often they were the result of drunken brawls, or else a settling of accounts between gang members, Spanish or North African, for example.

So Neveu made a point of adding:

'There's something really strange about this. I think you should come and see. We are between the large jeweller's and the shop selling artificial flowers.'

'I'm on my way.'

Maigret brought Santoni along with him for the first time. Inside the cramped black police car, Maigret was uncomfortably aware of the scent emanating from him. The Corsican was small in stature and wore stacked heels. His hair was slicked back, and he sported a large yellow diamond, probably fake, on his ring finger.

Dark silhouettes passed by on the dark streets, their soles clicking on the greasy surface. A crowd of about thirty people had gathered on the pavement of Boulevard Saint-Martin, where two policemen stood guard to prevent them moving forwards. Neveu was there waiting for them and he opened the door of their car.

'I asked the doctor to hang on until you got here.'

It was the time of day when this generally crowded corner of the Grands Boulevards was at its busiest. Up above the jeweller's a large clock showed 5.20. The artificial flower shop, which had only a single window, was dimly lit and looked so dusty and faded that you wondered whether anyone ever went in there.

Between the two shops was the entrance to a sort of alleyway that was so narrow that you could easily miss it. It was little more than an unlit passageway between two walls, which probably led into a courtyard of the type that was common in this neighbourhood.

Neveu cleared a path for Maigret. Two or three metres down the alley they found a small group of men waiting for them in the darkness. Two of them were carrying electric torches. You had to look very closely to make out faces.

It was colder and damper than out on the main street. There was a constant draught. Despite their best efforts to push it away, a dog

slipped between their legs.

A man lay on the ground, pressed against the dripping wall, one arm bent under him, the other, with a pale hand at the end of it, almost barring the passageway.

'Dead?'

The local doctor nodded:

'Death would have been instantaneous.'

As if to corroborate these words, the beam from one of the electric torches played over the body, throwing the shape of the knife still implanted in his back into eerie relief. The other torch lit up a semi-profile, an open eye and a cheek that had been scraped by the stones in the wall as the victim slumped to the ground.

'Who found him?'

One of the uniformed officers, who had been waiting for his moment, stepped forwards. It was hard to make out his features. He was young and appeared distressed.

'I was doing my rounds. I usually take a quick look in all the alleyways, because people get up to all sorts there in the dark. I noticed a shape on the ground. At first I thought it was a drunk.'

'Was he already dead?'

'Yes. I think so. But the body was still warm.'

'What time was this?'

'A quarter to five. I whistled to summon a colleague and then rang the station.'

Neveu chipped in:

'I took the call and got here straight away.'

The local police station was a short distance away, on Rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth.

Neveu went on:

'I instructed my colleague to call the doctor.'

'Did anyone hear anything?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

There was a door a little further on, with a dimly lit fanlight above it.

'What's that?'

'It leads to the office of the jeweller's. It's rarely used.'

Before he left Quai des Orfèvres Maigret had alerted Criminal Records, and the forensics team turned up with their equipment and cameras. Like all technical types they didn't ask questions but merely applied themselves to their task; their only concern was how

they would manage to work in such a tight space.

'What's at the other end of the courtyard?' Maigret asked.

'Nothing. Just walls. A single door which was nailed shut years ago, leading into a building on Rue Meslay.'

The man had been stabbed in the back – that much was clear – about ten paces into the alleyway. Someone had followed him without a sound, and the passers-by on the main street had been completely oblivious to what was happening.

'I slid my hand into his pocket and found his wallet.'

Neveu handed it to Maigret. One of the forensics men, without being asked, shone a torch on it that was several times brighter than the inspector's.

It was a normal wallet, neither new nor particularly worn, of reasonably good quality, nothing more. It contained three thousand-franc notes and a few hundreds as well as an identity card in the name of Louis Thouret, warehouseman, 37, Rue des Peupliers, in Juvisy. There was also a voter's registration card in the same name, a sheet of paper on which five or six words had been written in pencil and a very old photograph of a little girl.

'Can we make a start?'

Maigret nodded. Flash bulbs popped, cameras clicked. The crowd at the end of the alleyway was growing larger, and the police were struggling to hold them back.

After this, the forensics team carefully pulled out the knife, which was consigned to a special box, and finally they were able to turn the body over. They then saw the face of a man in his forties and his expression of utter bewilderment.

He hadn't understood what was happening to him. He had died without understanding. His look of surprise was so childlike, so much the opposite of tragic, that one of the policemen in the shadows let out a nervous laugh.

His clothes were clean, respectable. He was wearing a dark suit, a beige raincoat and on his feet, which were twisted at an odd angle, he wore greenish-yellow shoes, which seemed out of keeping with a day as colourless as this.

Apart from his shoes, he appeared so ordinary that he would have passed completely unnoticed on the street or on one of the numerous café terraces on the boulevard. Nevertheless, the policeman who had discovered him said:

'I get the feeling I've seen him before.'

‘Where?’

‘I don’t recall. His face is familiar. You know, he is one of those people you see every day but don’t pay any attention to.’

Neveu chipped in:

‘He looks familiar to me too. He probably works around here somewhere.’

But this didn’t explain why Louis Thouret had come down this narrow alleyway that led nowhere. Maigret turned to Santoni, because he had been in Vice for many years, and in this neighbourhood there are a certain number of sex maniacs with good reason to be lurking in dark alleyways. Nearly all of them are known to the police. A few of them are men of some standing. They get arrested from time to time. When they are released, they take up where they left off.

But Santoni shook his head.

‘Never laid eyes on him.’

So Maigret made a decision:

‘Carry on, gentlemen. When you’ve finished, take him off to the Forensic Institute.’

Then, to Santoni:

‘Let’s go and see the family, if he has any.’

If it had been an hour later he would probably not have gone to Juvisy himself. But he had the car. He was intrigued above all by the sheer ordinariness of the man and even his profession.

‘Juvisy.’

They stopped for a short while at a bar at Porte d’Italie and had a beer. Then they were on the highway, streetlights flashing past, overtaking a string of heavy lorries. When they arrived in Juvisy, near the railway station, they asked for directions to Rue des Peupliers but had to approach five people before they found anyone who knew.

‘It’s over that way, in a new development. When you get there, check the street signs. The streets are all named after trees. They all look the same.’

They drove past the huge marshalling yard, where carriages were constantly being switched from one line to another. There were twenty locomotives, belching steam, whistling, puffing. Carriages were shunted together with loud clangs. On the right was the edge of a new housing estate, the pattern of streets marked out by electric lights. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of

detached houses that all seemed to be the same shape and size, built from the same plan. The famous trees which gave the streets their names had not had time to grow; in places the pavements had not yet been finished; there were still black holes, patches of empty ground, while elsewhere there were gardens already coming into bloom.

Rue des Chênes . . . Rue des Lilas . . . Rue des Hêtres . . . Perhaps one day it would all look like a park, provided all these badly built houses, which resembled a child's construction set, didn't fall down before the trees had grown to full height.

Through kitchen windows, women could be seen preparing dinner. The streets were deserted, just here and there the odd shop, also brand new and apparently run by amateurs.

'Try on the left.'

They drove round for a good ten minutes before they found the name they were looking for inscribed on a blue sign, then missed the house, because number 37 came straight after number 21. There was only one light on – on the ground floor. It was a kitchen. Behind the curtain a rather large woman could be seen coming and going.

'Let's go!' sighed Maigret, extracting himself with some difficulty from the tiny car.

He tapped his pipe on his heel to empty it. As they crossed the pavement, the curtain twitched, and they saw a woman's face fix itself to the windowpane. She couldn't have been used to the sight of a car pulling up opposite her house. He went up the three steps. The front door was in varnished pine, with wrought-iron fittings and two small windows of dark-blue glass. He looked for a doorbell. Before he had managed to find it, a voice came from inside:

'What is it?'

'Madame Thouret?'

'That's me.'

'I'd like to have a word with you.'

She was still reluctant to open the door.

'Police,' Maigret added in a low voice.

That made her mind up: she slid the chain off, pulled back the bolt. Then, through a gap just wide enough to show a thin slice of her face, she checked out the two men standing on her doorstep.

'What do you want?'

'I have something to tell you.'

‘Can you prove that you’re from the police?’

It was pure luck that Maigret happened to have his badge in his pocket. Usually, he left it at home. He held it out where the light would shine on it.

‘OK, I suppose it’s genuine.’

She let them in. The corridor was narrow, with white walls, the doors and door frames of varnished wood. The kitchen door was still open, but she guided them to the next room and turned on the electric light.

She was about the same age as her husband but bigger than him, though she didn’t give the impression of being overweight. She was big-boned, and her flesh was firm. The grey dress she was wearing under the apron she was now mechanically taking off did nothing to soften her appearance.

The room they were in was a rustic-style dining room; it probably doubled as a sitting room. Nothing was out of place, like in the display window or shop floor of a furniture seller. Nothing had been left lying around, not a pipe or a packet of cigarettes. No piece of needlework, not even a newspaper, to suggest that there were people who actually spent part of their lives here. She didn’t invite them to sit down but merely looked at their feet as if to make sure that they weren’t leaving marks on the linoleum.

‘I’m listening.’

‘Is your husband’s name Louis Thouret?’

She nodded; her eyebrows knitted as she tried to guess the purpose of their visit.

‘Does he work in Paris?’

‘He is deputy manager at Kaplan and Zanin’s in Rue de Bondy.’

‘Has he ever worked as a warehouseman?’

‘Yes, a while back.’

‘A long while?’

‘A few years ago. Even back then he was the one who kept the business running.’

‘Would you happen to have a photograph of him?’

‘What for?’

‘I’d just like to be sure . . .’

‘Be sure of what?’

She was growing more suspicious:

‘Has Louis had an accident?’

Involuntarily, she glanced at the kitchen clock, as if to work out

where her husband would be at that particular hour of the day.

'I'd like to be sure that he is the same man.'

'On the sideboard . . .' she said.

There were five or six photos there, in metal frames, among them one of a young girl and one of the man who had been found stabbed to death in the alleyway, only younger, dressed in black.

'Do you know if your husband has any enemies?'

'Why would he have any enemies?'

She left them for a moment to turn down a gas ring, where a pan was about to boil over.

'What time does he normally get home from work?'

'He always takes the same train, the 6.22 from Gare de Lyon. Our daughter takes the following train, because she finishes work a little later. She has an important position and—'

'I am obliged to ask you to accompany us to Paris.'

'Is Louis dead?'

She gave them a sharp look, as if to warn them not to lie to her.

'Tell me the truth.'

'He was murdered this afternoon.'

'Where?'

'In an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin.'

'What on earth was he doing there?'

'I don't know.'

'What time did it happen?'

'Shortly after four thirty, as far as we can tell.'

'At four thirty he is at Kaplan's. Have you spoken to them?'

'We haven't had time. Besides, we didn't know where he worked.'

'Who killed him?'

'That's what we are trying to find out.'

'Was he on his own?'

Maigret was becoming impatient.

'Don't you think it would be better if you got dressed and came with us?'

'What have you done with him?'

'By now he should be at the Forensic Institute.'

'The morgue?'

What could he say to that?

'How can I let my daughter know?'

'You could leave her a note.'

She thought about this.

‘No. We’ll go to my sister’s and I’ll give her the key. She will come here and wait for Monique. Do you need to see her as well?’

‘Ideally, yes.’

‘Where should she come?’

‘My office, Quai des Orfèvres. That would be the easiest. How old is she?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Can’t you contact her by telephone?’

‘Firstly, we don’t have a telephone. Secondly, she will have left work already and be on her way to the station. Wait here.’

She started to walk up the stairs, which creaked under her steps, not from age but because the wood they were made from was too flimsy. The whole house gave the impression of having been built with cheap materials, which would doubtless give out before they grew old.

The two men looked at each other as they listened to the comings and goings above their heads. They would have wagered that she was changing into something black, and probably fixing her hair. When she came back down they exchanged another glance: they were right. She was already in mourning dress and smelling of eau de cologne.

‘I need to turn out the lights and switch off the gas. Would you wait for me outside?’

She hesitated in front of the small car, as if she were worried that she wouldn’t fit in. Someone was watching them from the house next door.

‘My sister lives two streets away. Your driver should go right, then take the second left.’

The two houses were so alike it was as if they were twins. The only difference was the colour of the glass in the front-door windows. These ones were an orangey yellow.

‘I’ll be right back.’

In fact, she was gone a good quarter of an hour. When she returned to the car she was accompanied by a woman who was her spitting image and who was also dressed in black.

‘My sister will come with us. I thought we could all squeeze up. My brother-in-law will go to my house to wait for my daughter. It’s his day off. He is a train guard.’

Maigret sat next to the driver. The two women in the back left only a tiny amount of space for Inspector Santoni. Every now and

again they would whisper to each other as if in a confessional.

When they got to the Forensic Institute near Pont d'Austerlitz, Louis Thouret's body, according to Maigret's instructions, was still fully clothed and had been placed temporarily on a marble slab. It was Maigret who uncovered the head while looking at the two women, whom he was seeing together for the first time in broad daylight. A little earlier, in the darkness of the street, he had taken them for twins. Now he noticed that the sister was the younger by three or four years and that her body had retained a certain softness, though not for much longer, no doubt.

'Do you recognize him?'

Madame Thouret had her handkerchief in her hand but she wasn't crying. Her sister held her arm, as if to comfort her.

'Yes, it's Louis. My poor Louis. When he left me this morning he had no idea—'

She broke off abruptly:

'No one has closed his eyes?'

'You can do it now, if you wish.'

She looked at her sister; they seemed to be unsure which of them should take responsibility. In the end the wife did it, with a certain air of solemnity, murmuring:

'Poor Louis.'

At that point she noticed his feet sticking out from under the sheet and she frowned.

'What's this?'

Maigret didn't understand straight away.

'Who put these shoes on him?'

'He was wearing them when we found him.'

'He can't have been. Louis never wore yellow shoes. In any case, we've been married twenty-six years and he knew that I wouldn't have allowed it. Have you seen this, Jeanne?'

Jeanne nodded.

'Perhaps you should make sure that the clothes he is wearing are his own. You are in no doubt about his identity, are you?'

'None at all. But these aren't his shoes. I'm the one who polishes them every day, so I should know. This morning he was wearing black shoes with double soles, the ones he uses for work.'

Maigret pulled the sheet off completely.

'Is this his raincoat?'

'Yes.'

‘His suit?’

‘That’s his suit, yes. But that’s not his tie. He would never wear anything so loud. This one is almost red.’

‘Did your husband follow a regular routine?’

‘Very much so. Ask my sister. In the morning he would catch the bus from the corner of the street to Juvisy station in time for the 8.17 train. He always travelled with Monsieur Beaudoin, our neighbour, who works in the Tax Office. At Gare de Lyon he took the Métro to Saint-Martin.’

The man from the Forensic Institute signalled to Maigret, who understood and led the two women to a table where the contents of the dead man’s pockets had been laid out.

‘I presume that you recognize these objects.’

There was a silver watch with a chain, a handkerchief without a monogram, an open packet of Gauloises, a lighter, a key and, next to the wallet, two small blue cardboard stubs.

It was these stubs that caught her eye immediately.

‘Cinema tickets,’ she said.

Maigret examined them and said:

‘They’re from a newsreel cinema in Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. If I am reading the figures correctly, they are from today.’

‘That’s not possible. Did you hear that, Jeanne?’

‘It does seem very odd,’ the sister replied in a measured tone.

‘Would you have a look at the contents of the wallet?’

She did so and frowned again.

‘Louis didn’t have this much money this morning.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I check his wallet every morning to make sure that he has enough money. He never carries more than a thousand-franc note and two or three hundreds.’

‘Could he have drawn some more?’

‘It’s not the end of the month.’

‘When he gets home in the evening does he have the same amount in his pocket?’

‘Less the price of his Métro ticket and his cigarettes. He has a season ticket for the train.’

She wasn’t sure whether she could put the wallet in her handbag.

‘I suppose you will need to hold on to this?’

‘Until further notice, yes.’

‘What I don’t understand is why they changed his shoes and tie.

And also why he wasn't at work at the time it happened.'

Maigret didn't pursue this. He got her to sign some official forms.

'Are you going home?'

'When can we have the body?'

'Probably in a day or two.'

'Will there be a post-mortem?'

'The examining magistrate might order one. It's not certain.'

She looked at her watch.

'We have a train in twenty minutes,' she said to her sister.

And to Maigret:

'Would you be able to drop us off at the station?'

'Aren't you going to wait for Monique?'

'She can make her own way home.'

They had to make a special trip to Gare de Lyon and watched as the two almost identical figures mounted the stone steps.

'Hard as nails, that one,' grumbled Santoni. 'That poor sucker can't have had much of a fun life.'

'Not with her, at least.'

'What do you think about this business with the shoes? If they were new, we could assume that he'd bought them today.'

'He wouldn't have dared. You heard what she said.'

'Or the flashy tie.'

'I'm curious to see if the daughter is anything like her mother.'

They didn't go straight back to Quai des Orfèvres but stopped off at a brasserie to have dinner. Maigret phoned his wife to tell her he didn't know what time he would be home.

The restaurant also smelled of winter, with damp raincoats and hats hanging on every hook and the dark windows misted up.

When they arrived at the gate of police headquarters, the officer on duty told Maigret:

'There was a young woman asking for you. Said she had an appointment. I sent her up.'

'Has she been waiting long?'

'About twenty minutes.'

The fog had turned into a fine drizzle, and the perpetually dust-covered steps of the main staircase were mottled with damp footprints. Most of the offices were empty. A crack of light was visible only under a few of the doors.

'Want me to stay with you?'

Maigret nodded. Since Santoni had been there at the beginning of

the inquiry, he might as well carry on.

A young woman in a distinctive light-blue hat was sitting on one of the chairs in the waiting room. The room was dimly lit. The office clerk was reading an evening paper.

'This one's for you, chief.'

'I know.'

And to the young woman:

'Mademoiselle Thouret? Would you follow me into my office?'

He lit the lamp with the green shade which illuminated the chair across from his, the one he sat her on, and noticed that she had been crying.

'My uncle told me that my father has died.'

He didn't say anything at first. Like her mother, she held a handkerchief in her hand, but hers was rolled into a ball, and she was kneading it with her fingers in the way that Maigret liked to knead putty when he was a child.

'I thought Mama was with you.'

'She went back to Juvisy.'

'How is she?'

What could he say to that?

'Your mother is a very brave woman.'

Monique was quite pretty. She didn't look a lot like her mother, though she shared her solid build. It was less obvious on her, as her flesh was younger and softer. She was wearing a well-tailored outfit, which surprised Maigret a little, as she certainly hadn't made it herself or bought it off the peg.

'What happened?' she finally asked, and at that moment a small teardrop appeared between her eyelashes.

'Your father was stabbed to death.'

'When?'

'This afternoon, between four thirty and a quarter to five.'

'How can this have happened?'

Why did he get the feeling that she wasn't being entirely sincere? The mother too had offered a sort of resistance, but, given her character, that was only to be expected. Basically, for Madame Thouret, being murdered in an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin was a form of social disgrace. She had organized her life, not only her own but that of her family, and a murder did not fit into her scheme of things. Not to mention that the dead man was wearing yellow shoes and a tie that was almost red!

Monique, for her part, was more circumspect, wary of answering too many questions and giving too much away.

'Did you know your father well?'

'Well . . . Of course . . .'

'Yes, of course you knew him as well as anyone knows their parents. What I'm getting at is: did you confide in him? Did you discuss your private life and your private thoughts with him?'

'He was a good father.'

'Was he happy?'

'I guess so.'

'Did you see him sometimes in Paris?'

'I don't understand. In the street, do you mean?'

'You both worked in Paris. I know that you didn't take the same train.'

'We didn't have the same office hours.'

'Did you ever meet up for lunch?'

'Sometimes, yes.'

'Often?'

'No. Very occasionally.'

'Did you go to his workplace?'

She hesitated.

'No. We met in a restaurant.'

'Did you phone him?'

'I don't remember ever doing that.'

'When was the last time you had lunch together?'

'Several months ago. Before the holidays.'

'Whereabouts?'

'At La Chope Alsacienne, a restaurant on Boulevard Sébastopol.'

'Did your mother know?'

'I suppose I told her. I can't remember.'

'Did your father have a cheery disposition?'

'Fairly cheery, I think.'

'Did he enjoy good health?'

'I never knew him to be ill.'

'Any friends?'

'We mainly socialized with my aunts and uncles.'

'Do you have a lot?'

'Two aunts and two uncles.'

'Do they all live in Juvisy?'

'Yes. Not far from us. It was Uncle Albert, the husband of my

Aunt Jeanne, who told me my father had died. My Aunt Céline lives a little further away.'

'Are they both your mother's sisters?'

'Yes. And Uncle Julien, who is married to Aunt Céline, also works for the railways.'

'Do you have a boyfriend, Mademoiselle Monique?'

She looked slightly put out.

'I don't think this is the moment to discuss that. Do I have to see my father?'

'What do you mean?'

'From what my uncle said, I thought that I had to identify the body.'

'Your mother and aunt have taken care of that. However, if you wish—'

'No. I guess I will see him back at the house.'

'Just one more thing, Mademoiselle Monique. When you met your father in Paris, was he ever wearing yellow shoes?'

She didn't answer straight away. To buy herself more time, she repeated:

'Yellow shoes?'

'Greenish-yellow, if you prefer. What back in my day were known as – if you pardon the expression – goose-poo shoes.'

'I don't recall.'

'And you don't recall him wearing a red tie?'

'No.'

'When was the last time you went to the cinema?'

'I went yesterday afternoon.'

'In Paris?'

'In Juvisy.'

'I won't keep you any longer. I presume you have a train to catch.'

'In thirty-five minutes.'

She looked at her wristwatch, got up and paused for a moment.

'Good evening,' she said finally.

'Good evening, mademoiselle, and thank you.'

And Maigret escorted her to the door and closed it behind her.

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